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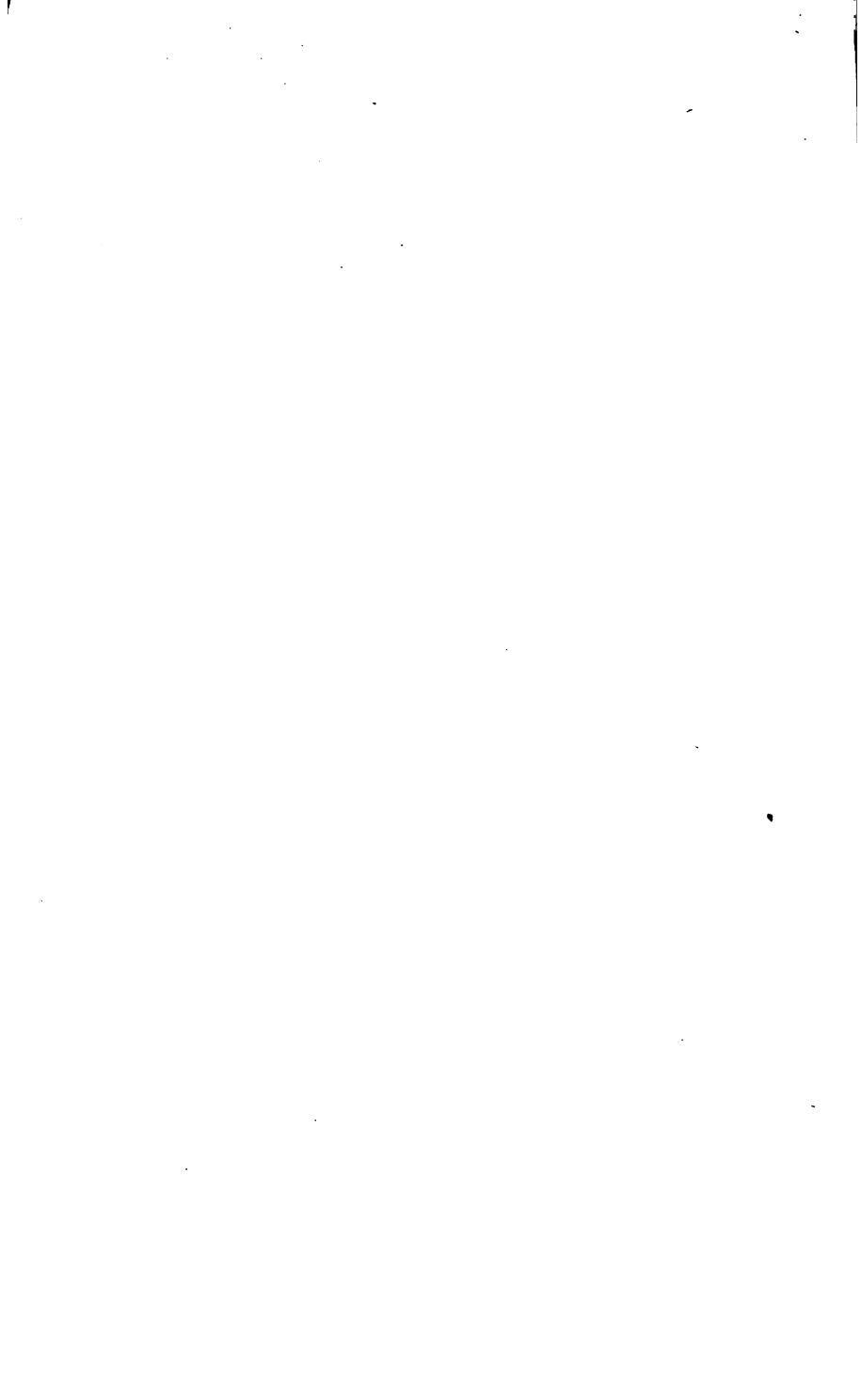
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# ROBERT CHETWYND'S CONFESSION.

*A Novel.*

BY

ELIZABETH A. MURRAY,

AUTHOR OF 'ELLA NORMAN,' 'JOHN ALLSTON'S VOW,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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# ROBERT CHETWYND'S CONFESSION.

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## CHAPTER I.

### TWO YEARS AFTER.

YEARS slip insensibly by, when their epochs are unmarked by any stirring events. In the quiet of the little circle at the Priory, more than two had elapsed after Evelyn's death without any occurrence of note to mark the time, save two short visits to town, and two brief inroads from Robert. Caleb came and went, filling now an exceptionable place among his former patrons,—that of a humble friend, one by whom a great and unrequitable obligation had been conferred, yet strictly keeping within his own orbit.

Letters from Blanche Pelham, Lady Agnes's only remaining daughter, and occasional visits

from Gilbert, served to vary the monotony, which was Lady Agnes's idea of the training of a young lady of rank before she was presented; and her own infirmity, and the retirement consequent on it, made the arrangement suitable for both.

Mr. Pelham filled a high office in India, and, after the manner of Indians, was always "coming home" after some particular goal had been reached. Meanwhile, Blanche wrote affectionately to her mother, and almost gushingly to Ethel, considering that she was only a baby when she last saw her. She sent her Dacca muslins, and Trichinopoly chains, and all sorts of Indian curiosities. And then, as Lady Agnes's bad sight became actual blindness, Ethel became her amanuensis, and a regular correspondence between aunt and niece ensued.

Mrs. Pelham was naturally a good woman, but without any great intellect, and therefore the constant victim of the sharp practices of others, of her own peculiar illusions and prejudices, and, beyond all, of her own vanity. A woman of this stamp may pass through life without showing her weakest points; as it is only the storm which can test the strength of a ship, so it is only when characters are really tried that the

soundness of their principles can be known, even to themselves. Ethel therefore had full confidence in Aunt Blanche, and in her professions of interest in her, and looked forward eagerly to the time when she should know her personally as "another mother to her dear orphan niece, whom she so fondly loved."

Gilbert came and went. He loved the Priory, and he valued his relations with it and its proprietors. His father dead, his uncle in India, Gilbert had never known any other home. His holidays had always been spent there in his school days. He had his room, which was never appropriated to any one else, in which all his superfluous personalty was stored; and Ethel had grown up to regard him in the light of a cousin or brother. The Priory gamekeeper had taught him to shoot, and many hares and rabbits had been the victims of his boyish prowess in the old woods of the Park.

Every man remembers while he lives, I believe, with tender interest, the spot upon which he has first taken a life—start not, gentle reader!—I mean not a human life, but one doomed to be sacrificed to that human instinct for destruction which, in a civilized age, finds vent in

"sport." A place where a boy kills his first rabbit or brings down his first bird is dear to him for ever, and in Gilbert this trait was developed to some excess. Whenever he came home he led Ethel to these poetic localities, and discoursed on the incidents which immortalized them to him, until her interest in the subject was scarcely less than his own. Ethel had no brother, and Gilbert's fresh, lively manner, and the nonsense he talked to her of what was doing in the outer world, were very fascinating to one shut up as she was; and the dash of fast horshness which occasionally tinged his conversation only added piquancy to the subjects he was illustrating. If, however, Ethel adopted any of these choice expressions, which were now becoming very fashionable among the set in which he moved, he was down on her at once.

There was something which always restrained her from asking him about the ladies he accompanied to the hunt. She had often wondered who they were, but she never could make up her mind to allude to them, and he was only too glad to be spared. He had made it "all right" with Roger, however—that is, he had told the old man some plausible tale which tended to ex-

onerate himself and implicate some one else in the blame of being in attendance on them; but whenever he was at all slangy, or took her to task for adopting his pet expressions, she involuntarily remembered that day—blushed, and in the end said nothing.

On the occasion of each fresh visit, Gilbert found the companion of his boyhood developing more and more into womanhood. She had never been, in his opinion, pretty enough to be “spoony” upon, as a very young girl; but she was “a jolly nice girl to talk to,” he said. But as Gilbert grew into complete manhood, and mixed more in the world, his tastes became more critical, and he began to admit to himself that Ethel was filling out into a fine woman. Once or twice he brought a friend with him for a day’s shooting, and when a second voice was added to this opinion, he began to think she was worthy of—consideration—I use the word in one sense only, for she had always been “considered” as such a man would have considered his sister. But Gilbert had made up his mind long ago to marry early—to marry well; and if he could get beauty and love added to rank and fortune, why, he would be a lucky fellow!



Gilbert's father had been, like his brother, a civilian; but, unlike him, he had amassed a large fortune—£250,000 had been the sum which this his only son inherited on his father's death. It was vested in India stock; and this fortune made Gilbert Pelham a desirable *parti* in any rank of life. Though with a good name, one which inferred a better family than they could lay claim to, the Pelhams had really no great connection to boast of—no family "place" belonging even to some distant cousin, from which they could date their origin. Gilbert would be a landed proprietor when he could fix on an estate to buy; but he was almost feline in his attachment to old haunts. No new home would ever please him after the Priory, which, in default of any other, was always "home" when he claimed one among strangers. If the Priory were in the market, he would buy it at a fancy price; and what if he could secure it, as it stood, with a wife!—the wife he felt he would have selected among all women; the one whose training he had witnessed, whose confidant he had been all her life; the one whom he was very sure he could win if he tried; whom he thought—well, he would not be too sure what he thought; she

might change after a season in town. Gilbert smoked many a cheroot over the idea, and determined to think of it; it was an idea well worthy of "consideration."

This young Anglo-Indian was deemed a "decided catch" among mothers, and his personal appearance was quite sufficient to have made him a dangerous detrimental among daughters, if it had been his only gift. He was moderately tall, with a well-set, graceful figure, fair, with full, pale, well-trained blue eyes, which could assume every gradation of tenderness at his will; a short, slightly aquiline nose; a rather cold, hard mouth, which a handsome, well-trimmed moustache rather concealed; a square, well-shaped forehead, and fair *chevelure*, completed a man who yet offered no very distinguishing features from any dozen similar men to be found in Pall Mall, St. James's Street, or any haunt of English gentlemen about town.

Gilbert Pelham, in his own opinion, was "able to take care of himself;" and as that self was also something very precious in his own estimation, the mark of self-confidence was the best proof of his unbounded self-approbation. He had "taken care of himself" at Harrow; he had

taken care of himself at Oxford; and now that he was about town, and "seeing life," he was still taking care of himself; and although he nibbled about every bait thrown out to him by the veteran anglers of Belgravia, it was with the coolest certainty of "knowing what he was about," and not biting. If there had ever been a suspicion of verdure about him, no trace of that colour was to be discerned now; and at the early age of twenty-three he was about as wide-awake a fellow as was to be found about the clubs. He had gambled and lost, and retrieved his losses; he had drank, but without permanent injury to himself; and he frequented questionable circles, where he could enjoy himself and give the rein to his pleasures without being "hooked," as he feared to be, had he been less reserved, in more unexceptionable quarters. The one pure picture which refreshed his heart with its wholesome impress was the calm, still "home" of his youth. There at least he was not angled for; he was liked for himself; and he knew that were he penniless it would still be the same. With all his conceit and self-sufficiency, the Priory was therefore a dear home to him. He loved and revered Lady Agnes. It was a

feather in his cap, a thing to his credit, that she was a sort of adopted mother to him. He liked in good society to allude to her as such; and the certainty that she was fond of him, knew only the better side of his life, and was in utter ignorance of all that was questionable in his career, gave him confidence in her society, and made him doubly agreeable to her. At the Priory, then, Gilbert was in his glory; and during his short visits he had no time to get tired of the monotony, for he dispelled it by his presence, and it was a soft, sweet unction to his vanity to know this. He was the hero of the moment; told the old lady all the gossip of town life which could interest her concerning the survivors of her former acquaintance; and she in return unconsciously furnished him with materials for many piquant and telling "things," to bring out in his own dressing on proper occasions, concerning men, women, and incidents which had faded from the memories of many who, living in the constant hurry of life, had, in the ever-changing scene before them, less accurate recollections of the past. A long chat with the old lady was as great enjoyment to the young man as it was to her, who, wincing under her own maternal

disappointments, felt gratified beyond measure at the deference and attention he always paid her, and with the fraternal interest he took in Ethel. In fact, Gilbert was just the man to win golden opinions from older people, and indeed from all classes who appreciate "a steady, prudent young man, who can take care of his own, and who neither squanders nor wastes nor lends his money, as other prodigals do, but who uses life, and does not abuse it." Oh, for a list of the various adjectives of the widest significance which at various times were applied to this model *parti*!—"so free," as the speakers said, "from the excesses of youth; without a father, with only lawyers for guardians, and taking such good care of *himself*!"

Yes, it is but too true, the man who "takes care of himself," who places his own interests, his own gratification, his own credit, in a paramount position, will always win the world's respect. He may win, too, their envy, their hatred, their malice, their detraction even, but in their secret hearts it is his success they are worshipping. They bow to him instinctively, while he who is actuated by all the finest and noblest of man's instincts, who has developed those in-

instincts under Christian teaching, who approaches as close as frail man can approach to the Divine model, is too often voted a fool, "wasteful," "extravagant," "imprudent," "careless"! Alas, alas! let a man only seem decorous, and "take care of himself," and what an amount of vice and meanness, and profligacy and deceit is he not able to hide under that plausible exterior!

Mothers who petted Gilbert were quite certain that he would make an admirable husband to the lucky girl it might please him to select, or who had the tact to catch him. These were the world's veterans who should have been able to form a correct opinion, and therefore our dear, blind old friend, with no opportunities of testing him by the little traits which unconsciously betray a man's real nature, must be excused for simply endorsing the world's verdict.

Little by little it dawned on her that it would be a delightful thing if the young people would only take a fancy to each other! Her Ethel, her darling, was a match for any one. She would have a good fortune, she was a fine handsome girl, or would be as she filled out,—so Nellie told her; and she was good—she was a fine character—she would wish nothing better for Gilbert than

such a wife, even if Ethel were a stranger to her, —and if her darling was to have a good, steady sensible husband, who could she select more so than this most excellent young man. Lady Agnes was no matchmaker ; she would not have taken a step to secure a ducal coronet for her grandchild, lest the step might cast the faintest suspicion that the bauble had not been fairly won by her own worth. She would not even have hinted to Nellie that the idea had crossed her mind, but, nevertheless, it occupied many hours of her time, when, for lack of sight, she was thrown back on her own musings, when she sat and listened to the slightest inflexions of the voices around her, and tried to judge by them of the feelings of those who were talking.

When Ethel “came out” she would no doubt “take,” but then came that terrible mystery—her darling Charlie and the thing which no one now could ever hope to clear up, the dread thing to which her thoughts refused to give form, but which when settlements and antecedents, and all other preliminaries had to be undergone, are so terrible to contemplate where there is a secret flaw. Gilbert’s uncle had taken Charlie’s sister, and therefore that family question had been al-

ready ventilated and *buried*. At least so she hoped, for ever. And then pictures of the two children of her love, in the later declining years of her life, clinging to her, and making her last days an idyl of peace and tranquil happiness, would illuminate the darkness of her fate.

Gilbert then would always be sure to receive a glad welcome at the Priory—a welcome “*home*,” as they both called it. Whenever sick of the hollow, unreal world in which he was mingling, he took a run home, for rest and peace and happiness, he said; when he would bask in the sun or take shelter under a tree, or lounge away his days, being petted by his friends, and in return entertaining them with his ceaseless flow of sprightly conversation,—the small talk, the wit current in the clubs, which he could easily make his own, by a little management, and remain undetected.

There were two people, however, with whom Gilbert had not been so successful. One was Nellie—Nellie did not like him, and, like a true woman, she could not tell why; only she did *not* like him, she distrusted his perfection, and would have liked him better with a few more tangible faults. Gilbert knew this—knew that she saw



through him—through the glittering, polished surface which satisfied the rest of the world. He tried to propitiate her; but she was so “infernally cold and disagreeable!”—an irreproachable duenna—a watch-dog—a person with whom Ethel was quite safe as a child; but she was “too deucedly officious,” and in the way now, and like all poor relations, not easily shaken off; however, in time to come he, Gilbert, would “see about that,”—and with this vague threat he would console himself for some fancied damper from Mrs. Mildmay, and dismiss her.

The second person who did not like Gilbert was our humble but eccentric friend, Caleb Williams. A fellow of that sort, however, although he had to be tolerated on account of that accident, was a creature so entirely out of the orbit in which Gilbert revolved, that it was not likely he should ever even detect his disapproval, much less care for it. Gilbert was not yet a landed proprietor; he had no tenants, no humble retainers, whose love it was his interest to win, whose pride was centered in their landlord. For him had as yet been denied that softening humanizing influence which makes the link between hereditary masters of the soil and their people a

blessing to both. The link which gave hundreds around them a sort of proud proprietorship in Miss "Ethel," which made her *their* young lady; her beauty their boast; her intentions their interest. Gilbert belonged to no one,—he was his own,—the concentrated "*ego*" which money in the Funds gilded and increased into a colossal image, of which he was the one high priest and chief worshipper. The opinion of a travelling artist was nothing to him,—his loudest abuse would not have stirred his pulse to one extra throb. He had patronized the man once to please Lady Agnes, and to express his approbation of his plucky conduct in rescuing Ethel, and he had done his duty, but he had always thought it imprudent to let such debts hang over. He should have been paid off at the time; one thousand, two thousand even. The thing should have been done handsomely, but once and for ever. He did not think it prudent to have a fellow of the sort hanging about, holding on by the skirts of any family, with such a hold on it. No one could tell what scrape a fellow of that sort might get into, and when he was to work the screw on a girl like Ethel, with all her generous ideas of gratitude and unrequited obligation, and

on Lady Agnes, whose gratitude almost exceeded Ethel's.

Once these opinions had been propounded to Mrs. Mildmay, but somehow Gilbert had never renewed the subject. She had said very little, but that little had made him feel smaller in his own estimation than he had ever done before. But with Ethel, whenever he wanted to provoke her into a sparring match, the poor photographer was brought on the *tapis*, until he found that he was only stimulating her to a generous defence of him, and losing ground himself; and then he would make the *amende* by declaring he was only teasing her. Caleb Williams, however, could never take a prominent part in any comedy or tragedy in which Gilbert Pelham was to take the first part, and, therefore, the young man wasted few thoughts on him.

I fear that fable which, as a little boy, he must have read ("the story of the lion and the mouse"), did not impress Gilbert with the moral it was designed to convey. In common with many others, he did not recognize the fact that it is the *little* things of this world which are most potent for good or evil. (Are not our greatest and best in their power?)

## CHAPTER II.

## ROBERT'S SKELETON.

AMONG the sparse incidents of the two years during which Ethel had insensibly glided into womanhood, two were of some consequence on the surface of that quiet uneventful period—two visits from her uncle, Robert Chetwynd, to his mother.

Ethel no longer held him in awe, and often laughed at herself when she remembered her exaggerated fears before his first appearance among them, recorded in my first chapter.

On both occasions his stay was short, and he no longer ventured on any slight or impertinence. To his mother, money was made the ostensible reason for his appearance in England, the very

air of which he said was "too much for him," and her visits to London had been principally on his behalf; but Robert had other and more cogent reasons for going to Woodlandshire, which it was not convenient to avow.

After his first visit, the old lady had induced him to place Dora in a school at Munich, for which she agreed to pay, and then, unfettered either by her presence or that of a necessary governess, the pair wandered from one watering-place to another, as the seasons changed, and Robert's "luck" varied. He had let Chetwynd Park for a term, and had let it well, so that even the rent of it might have sufficed to live on, had either of them known how.

It was well understood in that neighbourhood, that the shock of the murder, and the stain on his own name by the suspicion cast on his brother, had made so permanent an impression on his mind, that he never would live on his own estate; he had never yet resided there since he had left the place with his father, and as he was by no means a popular character, the neighbourhood rather appreciated him for providing them with a much more efficient representative in the persons of his wealthy tenant and his family.

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People who settle all our affairs for us (except our money liabilities), who do our thinking for us, and are otherwise conversant with more of our histories than we know ourselves, on this occasion, however, were not aware of two incidents which occurred to Robert Chetwynd about this time. Two mysterious circumstances which, though apparently of the most trifling nature, were momentous as concerns our tale. It was the receipt, at intervals, of two packets, looking like common-place letters, but which burst like bombshells on him, and which for ever quenched what was left to him of peace or rest or happiness.

The first of these missives narrowly escaped Marion's scrutiny, for although, as a rule, they did not open each other's letters, yet she had a habit of mistaking the directions, and she had actually broken the seal of this one before he saw her error, and claimed his own. Then that peculiar affection which had before seized him, and excited her anxiety at the Priory, attacked him again, and a deadly pallor overspread his face; he managed, however, to escape to his room before he examined the contents of the envelope.

It was a photographed copy of the certificate

of marriage between Charles Chetwynd and Edith Douglas. Boyd was the name of the officiating clergymen, and the witnesses were Jane Boyd and Thomas Walters. A cold perspiration bedewed his frame ; for although he knew quite well that his brother's marriage must have been legal, even if secret, still, from whence had come this mysterious proof, and to what end had it been sent to him, and by whom ?

A London post-mark was his sole clue, not a very definite guide. One thing, however, he could do, he could destroy this evidence on the spot. That "dead men tell no tales" is a fallacy, for the dead bear mute witness to many things at times, but burnt paper certainly never can. Into the smallest fragments then did he tear this terrible document, and then, after burning them, he scattered the very ashes in every direction, to the no small wonder of the *femme de chambre*, who arranged the room.

A short time after this, another and still more startling missive reached him, and this time it actually did fall into Marion's hands, who, however, on finding it "only a photograph" of some scene she did not know or understand, turned to the envelope, and saw that it was directed to

Robert. Then she threw it over to her husband, and asked him if he knew the meaning of it:

"I am quite disappointed! I thought it was a *carte* I am expecting."

"Some insane fool, I suppose, seeking employment, who has sent me a very bad specimen of his art to tempt me."

"He has sent far then, for it is a London post-mark, and it is a queer view altogether. It would not tempt me."

Could Robert have pierced his wife through with his eyes, his glance could not have been more keen and scrutinizing, but she stood fire bravely, because innocently, and returned the questioning glance with interest. Again, she saw that deadly pallor, that rigid face, that averted eye, as her husband examined his strange dispatch.

"Good gracious, Robert, what ails you? Why, I do believe, you are getting heart complaint! What on earth is there in a bad photo to make you look like that?"

"D— the thing! I have only one of those confounded spasms I am so used to! Get me some brandy, and don't sit with your eyes starting out of your head at me!"



Then Marion, after the fashion of Captain Cuttle, "made a note of it." She had several similar "notes" in her secret repository, and these she tacked together and tried to make something of them, and took them asunder, and put "this and that together" a different way. She could make nothing of them however, but her curiosity once excited, she began to take a much deeper interest in her husband's correspondence.

The picture had been, like its predecessor, at once burned, but the original of that scene had been long engraved where nothing could obliterate it save the hand of death. Had it not haunted him night and day for years? Who was his enemy? for no friendly hand would thus tear open a wound never to be quite closed while life lasted!

None but one who had *seen it all* would have sent him that significant warning of the existence of some living witness to one passage in his life he believed known only to himself.

After weeks of anxious rumination, during which he grew more pale and emaciated than ever, a thought, like a sudden inspiration, seized him. Was there not some itinerant fellow, whom

his mother had patronized in her blind weak way, who had wormed himself into her good graces by pulling that girl out of the river, where he had better have left her? Nellie Mildmay was a great deal too intimate at the Priory, and there was a devil in that woman's eye, which meant mischief when he saw her at home! Could she and that girl have concocted that certificate, and used that man as a tool? Nothing more likely, he thought. Nellie was poor, and the girl would be a "better spec" for her than he would be, after his mother's death. But, then, that picture!

It was a rough pencil sketch evidently from which the photo had been taken. Nellie might have remembered *that* place, even have gone there to sketch it. But no! No one but an eye-witness of the incident there portrayed with hideous fidelity could have grouped those figures as they were there produced. It was a visible *facsimile* of his mental horror. The embodiment of that skeleton, the bones of which he felt were to rattle in his ears while he could hear, which would haunt his vision while he could see; whose voice would be heard above the rattle of the dice, the noise of the orchestra, the pleadings of the preacher, crying, "atone! atone!"—his

Frankenstein, from whom he could never flee!

It was then that Robert resolved on a journey to Woodlandshire. At this time he took great interest in photography, now becoming, he said, a perfect "craze" on the Continent; and he inspected poor Caleb Williams's productions, and vowed they showed "considerable genius and feeling for art."—"I must get that fellow's address; I dare say he is a cheap fellow as yet!" For this purpose he paid Ellen a visit, an unwonted honour from him, but at an hour when he knew she would be alone; and seating himself with his back to the light, and thus obliging her to face it, he asked her deliberately, yet with apparent unconcern,

"Where is that roving genius to be found?"

"What roving genius?"

"I mean the fellow who did those photos. They are by no means bad attempts, and if I could find him out, I should like to send him to Chetwynd Park to take some views for Marion. *Triste* as it would be for her to live there, she is rather proud of being mistress of such a place, and she would be quite in her element showing them to the Vons."

Ellen's eyes never winked during this question; she looked at him, through him, if she could, but he only seemed to see a reel of cotton on the floor, and under her chair, so their eyes never met until he picked it up, and presented it to her with a *soupc on* of foreign manner playfully put on. Then their eyes met, only for a second, for his fell at once under hers, and he felt his little bit of acting had been futile.

"Mr. Williams, I suppose you mean. He goes to Wales, and seems to be always on the move, so I cannot give you his address. But why not get some man who understands sea views? Woodland scenery seems his especial line."

"I have a fancy to employ him, out of compliment to my mother, and this fellow seems to me to have a true feeling for the picturesque."

"You had better try in the village, and if you cannot succeed in getting his address there, when he comes this way again, I will be sure and tell him of your wishes."

"Thanks. I think I will leave an order for him to take down to Chetwynd Park, Davis will then make no difficulties about the matter."

And Ellen, with all her self-control, felt her cheeks get hot, her ears burning, her hands

trembling, and then, as he rose to leave, their eyes did meet, and Robert felt sure that she was an accessory at least to the act of which he suspected her. Did Ethel know? He thought not, she was younger, less experienced than the other woman; and even if she were a Lamia or a Geraldine, or worse, she could not prattle so unconsciously of the grotesque figure which she protested she actually admired in the man who saved her life, if she were leagued with him against her uncle.

Shortly after this, an advertisement appeared in the 'Times,' at intervals of a week, in which Mr. Caleb Williams, itinerant photographer, was requested to call where he would hear of something to his advantage, but without effect, as far as the advertiser was concerned. About this time, however, a note reached the Cottage. It ran thus, and enclosed the advertisement:—

"My dear Friend,—Look at this! As I suppose you are in the confidence of the writer, tell him delicately, and in your own words, as you do not approve of slang, that in the one eye which I show to the public, *blue* of the darkest hue alone prevails, not one tinge of *verdure* is to be traced in it, nor indeed forms any ingredient in the

composition of that queer animal, but still your faithful friend, C. W."

"Let me know if the coast is clear."

From which it may be inferred that the impediments in the way of obtaining his address were not insurmountable, and that Nellie's "could not" was more prudential than literal.

Robert returned to Baden in a state of mind not to be described. The same hand had evidently sent the two missives, and Ellen Mildmay knew of it; yet what did she know? What could she do to injure him without *hurting his mother*? *There* was his shield against her. Or was she storing it all up until a time when—when in fact the old lady was dead?

Before he left the Priory, Robert told his mother that there was a German oculist who might probably be able to restore her sight, and urged her to try him. His mother's blindness was a great convenience to him in many ways; still, he felt it was imperative that he should regain some influence over her, and break up that exclusive intimacy with Ellen and Ethel. She was completely in their hands now, and it needed some great event, some urgent reason, to break up the sort of thing she had "dropped

into." If she would only try, the time occupied in an operation, and the change of living, would, he felt convinced, at least interrupt their intercourse,—it would not be his fault if Ethel was not led into mischief, and brought down a little from favour.

Lady Agnes came to no decision, but he hoped he had sown seed likely to bear fruit. The crude materials were there; time would help him to harmonize and shape them to his ends; and then would rise that grim spectre of what Ellen must know, and how she would use her knowledge!

Robert began to drink more deeply, and to play more recklessly than heretofore; he rushed from one excitement to another, sometimes winning large sums, then again losing all, yet the whole time haunted by a spectre,—haunted until the very cards with which he played seemed to lose their usual faces, and to become distorted photographs of that dreaded thing. He had a room to himself now, for he dared not trust himself at all times where Marion could hear him talk in his sleep. In fact, Dante's 'Inferno' was so vividly realized to Robert, and he was so conscious of the fact, that one day, having interrupted Marion and Dora discussing the poem, he

asked them "what they meant by their allusion." Then recovering himself, he pretended he had been acting, but Dora thought "papa had grown very queer," and Marion made another "note."

There was a sluggish vein of something, made up of cunning, curiosity, and aptness for intrigue, which developed itself late in life in his wife, when she felt bored with everything else, and sick of the life she was leading. Pleasure or amusement would soon have obliterated her "notes," but she had little to please or amuse her; she knew of some of her husband's vices, and these mysterious missives, and his changed manner threw a sort of vague terror over her life, too. What if anything was going to happen, and that *she* should suffer by it? That was a question of great interest to Marion.

What did that picture mean which had made such a change in him? Then she explored in regions to which she was never expected to have gained access; but what can a wife find out when a husband burns what he does not wish her to see? Marion made some discoveries, but not the one she was searching for, yet dreaded to find—a something, she knew not what, but which *must*



have a terrible significance to her ; a something in which her mind had a morbid interest, although she could not even guess what that something might be.

Incapable of anything good or great, but guiltless of any active or positive crime, or even evil intent, the wife was sharing, in a modified degree, the punishment of her husband's "*mystery*."

She had always thought Robert close and odd and queer, fancied it was his way ; but as long as he let her have her way, let her dress, and then gave her an opportunity of showing that dress ; took her about, and gave her just the quantity of his company which was useful and sustaining, she never troubled her head to penetrate into what was occupying his mind. If it made him gloomy and morose it could not be very entertaining to her, and Pleasure was the goddess at whose shrine she had worshipped hitherto. Now pleasure palled upon her ; she was fading, and the means of dressing and enjoying amusements decreasing, her power of attracting that sort of vapid attention, which a woman who is correct in her moral deportment can only secure by youth or beauty or piquancy of manner or hospitality, was gone. Robert either could

not, or would not, furnish her with all the money she wanted; and then she was forced to take an interest, though not a pleasurable interest, in his gloomy looks—his guilty looks!

Altogether Marion's ignorance was not bliss on this occasion, but it gave her something to think of,—to be always on the alert to find out "something" to get a glimmer of light thrown on her husband's inner life if she could, and speculate on the dark chasm beyond, or watch furtively for that glimmer until it came in affected indifference. That the smallest mite in creation has its mission we dare not question; and yet it has occasionally puzzled the most thoughtful when the question has suggested itself,—for what end are such women created?

## CHAPTER III.

## LOVE'S SWEET DAWN.

MEANWHILE, unsuspected by her most watchful friends, and unknown to herself, Love was beginning to lend zest and piquancy to the hitherto tranquil existence of Ethel; although even this new element, tumultuous as it often is in the early dawn of a woman's life, seemed to take the subdued tone which characterized every surrounding of the Priory, nevertheless, a new gladness seemed to infuse itself through her spirit; she knew not how—a new light to diffuse itself over all which encompassed her—she knew not why. Life itself was a pleasure to her; all its little details gained fresh interest in her sight; and her own happy temperament seemed to re-

flect itself on, and give sunshine to, the dear ones to whom she was the centre of interest. Ethel was "wonderfully improved," "developing into a charming creature," etc. etc. Yet no one knew, not even the most astute of her guardians, that it was that crowning perfection of a woman's nature, which, whether it is called forth for weal or woe, whether excited by a worthy or an unworthy object, must exist—must give its magic touch, before a woman can claim to have reached the full measure of her womanhood. Pure or lofty, silly or misplaced, it matters not, until a woman's heart has felt its sway, and *suffered*, she is but an unfinished work—her destiny is unfulfilled!

But—

The inevitable hero of this impending romance was not one likely to make himself a party to any other phase of the tender passion than that sweet dream of soft, still, gratified preference in which he was, with subtle power, steeping her pure loving soul, until the time came when he was sure that he was quite safe in disclosing his intentions.

In his own estimation, and, truth to say, in the opinion of many of his shrewdest friends, Gilbert

Pelham was one of the most "wide-awake" and "safe" of his generation ; a generation which piqued itself on its "wide-awakeness," and its absence of all sentiment, albeit he was one who indulged freely, in other regions, in many of those fast pursuits which are pitfalls to the unwary. It was to the superior sagacity of his own character that Gilbert trusted to escape those dangers fatal to less experienced youth. Fair in complexion, auburn or tawny in *chevelure*, regular though somewhat hard in feature and outline, his tailor added to his well-made frame the air and style which placed him on a level with hundreds of other young men of equal fortune and position. He shunned, rather than cultivated, that distinct individuality which occasionally fires the ambition of more enterprising men, who, even when lacking that gift by nature, betray their aspirations in unmeaning eccentricities ; he arrived at "the correct thing" in his own estimation, and beyond that his ambition did not soar.

A fastidious critic might have objected to him that he was too much like other men of his set ; too much like other tawny lispers, who lounged about St. James's Street, and seemed to consider

the chief end in life gained when they displayed Poole's *chef d'œuvre* to other lispers of the same calibre. Some critics may cavil at the want of individuality which *distinguishes* the hero of Ethel's first love (if I may indulge in an Hibernianism), but my province is not to invent models for imitation; I only aspire to paint what I see, to record the doings of men and women fashioned in and by the age in which they live; for it is by these commonplace people that the chief business of "society" is conducted. Distinctive characters are rare, and time will tell if Gilbert Pelham is entitled to lay claim to virtues, or even vices, calculated to raise him above his compeers. That he believed himself justified in doing so then, and for a long time to come, was another question, and one which inevitably raised him to a prominent position in the little drama it is my province to record.

Entrenched behind his "safeness" and his "wide-awakeness," Gilbert felt himself quite secure from the consequences of unbending in the presence of amazons whose chaff amused and piqued him: women fluttering between different sections of society, not necessarily bad in themselves but deteriorating in their influence over the

class above them ; and these women it was now "the correct thing" for himself and others of his set to cultivate. Women who despised the class of honest humdrum society in which they were born ; who loved pleasure, and sought it in the extravagant and often grotesque imitations of the amusements of the inaccessible ranks above them ; women who dissipated the hardly-earned gains of a previous generation, or who earned their own living by some calling which threw them in contact with gentlemen above them in rank ; women who trained horses, who belonged to some circus, and who frequented hunt meets, and there called the men of their acquaintance by their christian names in the hearing of the ladies of their families ; who displayed their horsemanship in the presence, and to the bitter mortification, of those young ladies who aspired to equestrian celebrity in their own sphere, and who were thus weakly led on to imitate them (to the no small amusement of these bold spirits), and thus deteriorate from the standard of manners hitherto deemed imperative among ladies.

Belgravia had not yet raised the wail which these interlopers soon after elicited from British matrons, or those who personified them, and

which few are likely to forget. The "Bohemians," "Mesopotamians," horsebreakers, or whatever other epithet the slang of the day has given them, were "just coming in," and it was as much a part of Gilbert's *rôle* to patronize them or be patronized, as it was incumbent on him to display the "latest thing" in pegtops, the "widest thing" in sleeves, or the "loudest thing" in any other fashion which had received the sanction of the "fellows" he knew, tempered, however, always, by what was considered the best tone among them.

In this society Gilbert felt like a skilful pilot steering a well-trimmed yacht among sunken rocks and shoals, passing them all unscathed, enjoying the excitement and success, while his rivals in the race were continually grounding, and foundering, and otherwise coming to grief. He would reach the goal in safety, he said; the haven into which he intended to steer his course; the *home* in which, after showing what he could do in other quarters, he meant to settle down decorously as a model member of society—as a country gentleman, a magistrate, a husband, and the father of a family.

And for this end, after considering the ques-



tion quite dispassionately, Gilbert had come to the conclusion that he was in a safe groove; and mentally he appropriated Ethel and the Priory, indissoluble, simply because together they suited him, and consequently he meant to have them.

As a child, he had always petted and patronized Ethel in a lordly spirit, and also as a matter of prudence, suggested by that farseeing policy which was inherent in him, and which was in full exercise in his Harrow days, when hampers of "jolly grub" from the Priory afforded sumptuous midnight feasts to a chosen few of his house during term, and when the Priory afforded a headquarters to which he could resort in vacation and at Exeat, when no better engagement stood in the way; nay, to which he could even ask a friend sometimes, and feel secure of a welcome for both.

At that early time even, policy made him civil to Ethel. At that time it was only an "awful chouse" that the place could not be displayed to his chosen friends as his perspective inheritance instead of as the property of a friend; now, as his faculties developed, he saw his way made clear for eventual possession by marrying the heiress whose dark eyes had always sparkled

with innocent pleasure when she welcomed him, and whose usually pale cheek flushed when he told her how tall she was growing. Gilbert registered the day as an epoch in his life, when, arriving to spend his Christmas with them, he was going to kiss his little friend, and then involuntarily shrank from what he now felt would be too great a liberty with the tall girl whose hand was offered to greet him, but whose eyes fell under the admiration he frankly expressed for her attractions, although it was in the gaunt and bony era when the "no end of a girl" had elicited far different comments from her fastidious relatives.

She always was unfeignedly glad to see him, and pleasure always gave that illumination to her countenance which at that time it generally required. He was the only young man or boy with whom she had ever been on intimate terms; he was handsome and amusing, gentle and persuasive with her. The listless drawl which he had cultivated as the "correct thing" insensibly modulated and became expressive when he addressed her, and without going below the surface, she accepted it as a fact that he liked her as much as she liked him. She called it "friendship;" but as time went on, and as her heart

beat and her pulses quickened at the sight of him—as she felt the tell-tale blushes burning on her cheeks, she wondered if this was love? Wondered if he felt it too; and the persuasive but almost silent eloquence of his eye, his tone, his every gesture, gave the answer her heart craved; it was the sweet suspicion bordering on certainty; the intoxicating flattery of being perhaps beloved by him which was irradiating her life with a gladness she did not seek to analyse. Poor child! she was very happy—happy with the sweet, still gladness of perfect trust—the gladness which so fills our present that the future has no care for us.

She was not a romantic girl—she had read no novels of the day from which she might have gained some hard and useful hints; but she had a pure and high ideal of manly worth, and knowing no other men with whom she might have contrasted him, she invested Gilbert with all the attributes with which imaginative girls generally deck the heroes created by their fancies as standards by which to judge the objects of their affections. So Ethel, like many noble-hearted unsuspecting girls before her, gave the full wealth of her fresh young heart to Gilbert before she

had an opportunity of comparing his merits with those of others,—she did not know how much she loved him.

It was a matter of course that he should spread sunshine over her path by his presence, and that she should feel sad when he was gone; but she could not give definite form to the happiness which had stolen over her.

It was a matter of course that she should receive and read his letters to her grandmother, and answer them in her name; and in this correspondence he took care that he should appear in his best aspect to his “second mother;” and this respectful gratitude to the best friend of his childhood was a never-failing excuse for supplying her with the fashionable intelligence and gossip of the day after he left Oxford, and entered on his London career. We may be sure that the Bohemian element of his experiences, however, made no part of his confidences to her; in fact, his life must have been irreproachable if it accorded with the impression he laboured to produce, and succeeded.

Lady Agnes, as we know, was neither blind to the possibility of what might ensue, or averse to such a contingency,—and what could be better

for either? She could not see, or in Ethel's speaking countenance she might have read a confirmation of her dearest hopes; as she could not, the sweet secret fluttered in the girl's heart, unsuspected, for a time at least, by any one; while in her day dreams the old lady had long ago appropriated her own suite of rooms, and had relinquished the rest of the house to the "young couple." "My darling will never desert or neglect me, and I could not live long without her" Thus was everything in train for a *dénouement*, awaiting only Gilbert's pleasure.

It was spring, and Gilbert was in town enjoying the season, and rather liking the *empressement* of the mammas who were angling for him. It was pleasant to think that his mind was made up, and that there was nothing they could offer by way of temptation that could allure him. He had infinite confidence in his own taste and judgment; a horse, a dog, a servant, an equipage, —anything that he had once selected never could be surpassed, and Ethel and the Priory was a combination unique in his opinion. Those worldly dames were all "sold," as they would discover, some fine day; but still he permitted the attentions of these ladies in a gentle, long suffer-

ing spirit, and smiled blandly at their contests for the possession of what he had already given away,—disposed of elsewhere.

Except for a run down for a day, however, he did not intend going into Woodlandshire until there was something going on ; then he intended to bring about, if possible, an extension of Ethel's orbit,—she must be made to dress, and to go to a few lawn parties and archery meetings, and other rural gatherings. She was old enough now ; and it was necessary that she should do credit to his taste, justify the honour it was his intention to confer on her, and he would start the idea. There was, with all his conceit, a latent anxiety that she should be tested by public opinion before he committed himself, though he was too proud to admit this to his acknowledged self, the self governed by his code. Yet, until he had established a claim, how could he take upon himself to dictate or suggest or effect this revolution in her mode of life. He must take Mrs. Mildmay in hand ; put ideas into her head, and make her believe them to be her own !

While Gilbert was arranging all these plans in town, Caleb Williams, finding the " coast clear," reappeared in Woolerton.

## CHAPTER IV.

## A MYSTERY.

YES, like that traditional bad penny, as he said himself, the eccentric photographer once more turned up in Woolerton. He had learned a new process by which he could secure a likeness in a second, and the villagers crowded around him as if he were a necromancer.

“How he cotch’d them in that minute,” no one could tell, “only there they was surely, and as cheap as dirt in the bargain, and even for credit to particular friends!”

Caleb’s grand object in this visit, he said, was to take some model cottages for which the proprietor, who was living abroad, had sent some picturesque designs; so once more he was seen

limping about after his vocation, fully engrossed with it to all appearance, and yet not sufficiently so to be insensible to the close watch kept over him by Mrs. Grymes, who began to consider that "the licence given to that man ever since he had saved Miss Chetwynd's life was beyond all reason," and also that "as he did not save Mrs. Mildmay's, she did not see what cause he had to be dropping in for ever at the Cottage, giving drawing lessons, forsooth! very pretty, but still,"—and Mrs. Grymes would give an odious twinkle to end her sentence.

It was at a mature age and after some discouragement that Mrs. Grymes had succeeded in effecting the *coup* which secured her her Vicar and Vicarage, and she had had consequently ample time to acquire the habit of managing the affairs of her neighbours, while almost despairing of ever having any of her own to engage her attention.

This lady had long seen the impropriety, the *exceeding* impropriety of a lady in Mrs. Mildmay's position receiving the visits of a person in Caleb Williams's. She had been lenient at first, on account of the exceptional circumstances of the case; but Lady Agnes was blind, and could



not be expected to know all the "goings on" of the neighbourhood, and therefore Mrs. Grymes, filling, as she said, a most responsible position as the clergyman's wife, felt it incumbent on her to be doubly watchful over the "goings on" of Woolerton.

It was her practice, generally, to make people commit themselves, she said; she never dropped them when she suspected anything amiss,—she followed them up until she was sure of the rights of a story, and then no one could say she was a backbiter!

So with the benevolent end of finding out the rights of the thing, and "giving him a fair hearing," she sent for Caleb to take the Vicar's photo with the Vicarage in the background, and the meek man was made an unconscious accomplice, under the impression that he was giving the poor artist employment, and encouraging him for having performed that gallant action at the risk of his life. So Caleb was patronized at the Vicarage, and was now submitting his work for approval.

She had made two or three faint charges during his previous visits, but he had managed to parry them; but to-day she was determined not to be evaded.

"Yes, Mr. Williams ! quite charming. The Vicarage looks like a bower in Eden, I declare !"

"Does it indeed ? I feel quite flattered if you think so,—quite grateful for your approval."

He could have added that she was more fortunate than himself in being in a position to draw comparisons and pronounce conclusively on the resemblance ; but he had learnt to be circumspect, so he only smiled a smile in which her twinkling little eyes saw latent irony, but she gave no sign.

"And the Vicar, too ! Admirable ! Where did you acquire your art ?"

"In various ways. I always had a natural talent for painting, and studied a little ; but when I found myself unable to pursue the higher branches of the art, I devoted myself to the more popular and easily remunerated when my circumstances changed, and I required to make a living. Artists are glad to get pictures from life as studies,—to improve upon as they imagine,—and this is a pretty certain income to me. Good day !" and Caleb was departing.

"You are a lucky man to have acquired such a footing among our great people here. I understand you are quite intimate at the Priory, Mr. Williams."

"Lady Agnes has done me the honour of employing me, and has paid me handsomely for my work. I am very grateful for her countenance."

"Oh, not at all! I fancy the gratitude is on the other side, and ought to be, after making a hero of yourself, Mr. Williams. Why even Mrs. Mildmay is *grateful*. That was a good day's work for you!"

The inflection of the voice at the word "*grateful*" was not to be mistaken, but Caleb would not see it, and again he made an effort to depart.

"I often see you going in and out at the Cottage,—what pretty thing are you doing there now?"

"I give Miss Chetwynd occasional lessons."

"Indeed! I should have fancied, now, that the light at the Priory was better."

"I give my lessons at the Priory or in the field, but I had the honour of Mrs. Mildmay's acquaintance once in better days, and now that lady has not visited my change of position upon me. I knew her husband, and it is a pleasure to me sometimes to pay a visit which is quite unconnected with my *trade*. Good morning." And this time Caleb effected his escape.

"There are poor in her parish, let her look

after them, and mind her own business. Am I to be debarred from the society of the only creature on earth who knows me as I am, because I cannot enter her gate without being watched by that woman?"

Mrs. Grymes watched Caleb as he walked off, but he did not go into the Cottage then. When he did, which was after meeting the village Argus in another direction, he burst out into a storm in which prying women in general, and parsons' wives in particular, received anything but gentle treatment.

Nellie, as my readers will guess, knew more of this mysterious visitor than any one, even Mrs. Grymes, suspected, and exercised an influence over him which was as powerful as it was unobtrusive. She let him exhaust himself because it was a relief to him to be able to unburden himself to some one, and that some one could only be herself. When he had said all, she began to talk to him in her quiet, gentle way, and to make light of Mrs. Grymes's power of evil.

"If she alludes to you in speaking to me, I will tell her exactly the same thing, which you know is the simple truth, as far as it goes. I would ask Lady Agnes to give me some regular

employment, only, if I had to bolt suddenly, it might create, or rather increase suspicion. I gave the old cat reason to believe that it was my infirmity which kept me from pursuing my profession. Perhaps she may ask you the cause of my mutilated appearance; if so, tell her I had an encounter with brigands, and was nearly killed, and a fellow with one eye cannot well be a painter. After the accident, I resigned painting as a profession, and let the sun do the work for me, every word of which is strictly true. I have brought you the reply I intend to send to your worthy cousin, Robert Chetwynd."

" 'Mr. Caleb Williams presents his compliments to Mr. Chetwynd, and regrets that, as he has a commission to collect studies for a certain branch of art, he is not at liberty to accept the order with which Mr. Chetwynd has honoured him.' "

"I shall not send this until I am on the move again, or he will be over here again to catch me. It is the man and not the art which Robert Chetwynd wants! Blind man! if he knew what was good for him, I am the last fellow on earth he would care to see! If I could only frighten him into letting that poor child alone, and into leaving

that dear old soul to do as she pleases with her own, he might enjoy life and property, and all they can bring him, *if he can.*”

“You forgive him. Say you forgive him, Caleb?”

“From the bottom of my heart! My life has proved that, I think; but still, forgiveness for the past is not immunity for the future, or even the present. If he is honest, those certificates should warn him into silently doing his duty. They should suffice. If he does not act on them, he is a villain!”

“And if he does not, then, what will you do?”

“Tied hand and foot what can I do? No! my life has been an awful lesson—never conceal a little wrong, from moral cowardice. It is like hiding an acorn in the ground, and returning to find it an oak we can neither conceal nor uproot. I believe that fellow is suffering the torments of —, at this moment, I would not change places with him.”

“Don’t talk of him, Caleb, it makes me shiver.”

“Think what I must feel when it is impossible for me to do justice to some whom I have wronged without injuring, nay, blighting innocent victims! I declare to you the responsibilities which weigh

me down, which I cannot shake off, which are a necessary condition of my existence, are too much for me. I feel as if reason would leave me before all can be accomplished which I suppose my life has been spared for me to perform —. Think what my lot is, when I cannot come here, where alone I dare speak in my own identity, without having a prying old hag watching my movements. Nellie! your reputation will be the next sacrifice, if I don't take care. Everything I touch I blight. Every one who comes within the range of my influence, suffers from the poison of my presence. I am like the upas tree! O God! how long is this to last?"

"Caleb, there is no burden which He gives us, which He does not also give us strength to bear. Take courage, you have what ought to give 'that peace which passeth all understanding,'—you have made the greatest, the most noble sacrifice man can make. Do not mar the effect by repining."

"Perhaps so; but I cannot realize it always. The pressure is too overwhelming, and the burden too great. Look at me!" and he strode towards a mirror. "Look at the battered old craft, which is burdened with this tremendous cargo of secrets

and responsibilities. Is it not sure to founder and wreck all? And yet, even this frail and battered frame-work, which might be my shield in some respects, is not battered and disfigured enough to spare me from Mrs. Grymes. Nellie; she pays you a poor compliment when she insinuates anything but pity and compassion for this poor old carcase. If she only knew the truth! If she only knew the mysterious link which binds me to you all here, while we are yet irrevocably severed by that barrier, we none of us dare to pass. Nellie, you talk of sacrifice! What have you not sacrificed in holding out to me the hand of pure steadfast friendship? women are often capable of these things, I know; and yet, why is it that the moment a woman whose antecedents should place her beyond suspicion is commonly humane to one of the opposite sex, the tongues of all her own must wag, —must see harm in all they cannot understand?"

"Let them talk, Caleb; I don't care, my conscience is always my comfort."

"But I do care, and for Ethel's sake as well. Let a nice little scandal be got up, and then, as you are her Mentor, people will be saying things of her too! You will appreciate my gratitude, I



fear, at a low value, when I talk thus, but it is because I would warn you of your danger and hers. You are under the shadow of the upas tree, my friend, when you open these doors to me, and a word too much from that woman would be a handle to the enemy. When I am away, I am restless till I have an excuse to return, and, when I am here, terror of the consequences hunts me away ! By the bye, has that young Pelham been about here lately ?”

“Very little ; only for a day or two at a time.”

“Ethel is growing up, and your eyes must be open, my friend. How do you think he stands in the good graces of the Priory ?”

“He is a prime favourite, as you know, with Lady Agnes, and Ethel too, I think, likes him more than I do ; but she is so frank in expressing her liking, that I don’t think there is any other feeling at present.”

“It might be a good thing if there was, perhaps, although I don’t warm to Gilbert myself.”

“I don’t agree with you. If I had influence over any girl of Ethel’s position and character, I would say no ! emphatically no ! He is a cold-blooded, selfish, worldly young scamp. This is *my* opinion, without even the excuse for his fail-

ings of hot passions or the generous virtues which generally accompanies them. He is just the fellow to satisfy some cold-blooded, long-headed old father with some doll of a daughter without a heart. Poor Ethel's wealth of love would be thrown away on such a fellow, who, after his vanity was satiated by her admiration, would think the rest a tremendous bore. The girl must see more of the world and choose by comparison. I hope he will keep clear of this until he is caught up by some old dowager more wary than himself—though such would be a *rara avis*—or until Ethel has seen some one upon whom she can fix those irrepressible fancies which, I suppose, are innate in all women. Let her once know what a true sterling heart is, and she will not waste many thoughts on Gilbert Pelham. A girl of her temperament must soon love something, and, if he is in the way and tries it, he may creep in and fill the place worthy of a better man."

Nellie smiled. "Do you know, Caleb, what I am thinking of?"

"No. How should I?"

"Why, that we are doing what we deprecate in Mr. Grymes, in a certain degree. Are we not anticipating too much?"

"Nellie, don't I know the stock from whence that girl sprang? Don't I know what must be in her? Think of her mother,—of her father in like circumstances, and tell me if the experience of their antecedents ought not to be a warning to those who care for her. Ethel would do anything for one she loved, and that selfish coxcomb would mould her to his will, if she loved him."

"But if she does, and it is a match, I don't see, under the circumstances, why it should not be a good thing. I am sure Lady Agnes would prefer him to any stranger; and a marriage settlement would for ever end the question which Robert is intriguing to arrange his way."

"Nellie, do you think he could make her happy—satisfy her heart?"

"The heart makes its own happiness; and she will be happier in braving the faults of the man she loves, if she can see them, than in enduring the good qualities of one who cannot win her heart. She would not think him heartless—could not see him except through her own medium; and in time he might be made what her fancy has already painted him. She is, though, only a budding germ; still, the materials for a very noble, even grand, character are there; and

how often do we see a woman of that stamp gladly fulfilling her destiny with a worse man than Gilbert Pelham, while some insignificant little character becomes the idol of, and too often at the same time the torment of, the greatest and the best of men. Common-place people *wear well* in matrimony—often better than more attractive and promising specimens in the dawn of it.”

“And so you think there is no cause to fear?”

“I think that neither you nor I can do anything of any use, and that these things are best left to themselves. They require most delicate handling.”

“Would that I had your patience and faith!”  
And he rose to go.

“One thing you can do in the matter, Caleb. You can pray for her.” And then she took his hand kindly and gently. “Pray! and the God who has brought you through so much tribulation, who has supported you so long when you did not trust in Him, will hear you.”

“Now I will go and take a turn in the grounds—study effects, and perhaps by chance meet Miss Chetwynd and her ladyship, this glorious spring afternoon.”

"Yes, I think they will both be out. When I left them an hour ago, it was their intention."

"Now for a plunge through Mrs. Grymes's hundred eyes! I left her the other side of the parish, but her maid, no doubt, is on duty."

And, after carefully arranging his shade at the mirror, Caleb disappeared.

He went to walk off his irritation, he said; but there are people who, in going through this process, contrive to lash themselves up into a state of frenzy instead; and in the space of nearly one hour, in which he had scrambled about the woods and plantations, he certainly had not succeeded in calming his feelings. The very sight of those finely-toned gables and twisted chimneys seemed to excite him as he stood and gazed wistfully on the fair scene before him, and speculated upon the hands into which it might fall in times to come. He saw the two ladies emerge from the open window on the terrace, and walk up and down, the blind grandmother leaning on her child, and fondly caressing her hand as of her usual wont; but they only wandered among the flowers, and seemed to be discussing them. Then Mrs. Brandon, the housekeeper, appeared on the scene, and Ethel, leaving her grandmother with her, left

them, and came bounding on towards the walk leading to the bridge. It was immediately under a steep bank of laurels, on the top of which Caleb had stayed his steps to contemplate the future which seemed to have such a strange charm for him.

"I don't think I will meet her to-day. I am unhinged. I shall make a fool of myself." And yet he stood there watching her as she came down towards him ; and then she saw the well-known hat, and smiled a frank recognition ; and then Caleb felt that he must scramble down, and pay his *devoirs* to the young heiress of the Priory.

"Studying effects, Mr. Williams ? You will get glorious shadows to-day. I meant to have tried those three beeches on the lawn myself from my window, only I was prevented. We are going to have an unexpected visitor, and there were notes to write and arrangements to make after the late post came in, or Mrs. Mildmay might have helped us ; she went away early to-day."

Could Mr. Williams, the photographer, venture to ask for the name of the guest ? He thought not. It would be a liberty inconsistent with his

sphere in life. He tried to read the young girl's face instead. Her eyes were sparkling, her colour fitful and yet brilliant; there was excitement in her whole air—but pleasurable excitement, almost elation. It could not be Robert.

“An occasional guest must be a pleasing variety to you, Miss Chetwynd. You never seem to go anywhere, and there seem so few families near enough for morning calls on you.”

“Our guest to-night is only one of the family, at least he used to be before he quite grew up, Mr. Pelham.”

Perhaps it might have been that Caleb's eye was intently fixed on her, trying to read her very inmost soul; but Ethel, while making this common-place little speech, betrayed to him—to the man who had made it his business to read her character, and watch over her—the secret of her heart; the soft inflexion of her voice as she uttered Gilbert's name, the shy sweet glance of her eye, the gladness diffused over her whole person, expressed even in her step and gesture, told her tale to him.

Caleb looked absent and dazed for a moment; at least, so Ethel thought; he was flurried and evidently put out that day, but at length he said:—

"Mr. Pelham! Ah, yes! He is a relative I think. Is he not?"

"A sort of connection only, but he has been like a son almost to my grandmamma. This has always been his home, you know; that is, his nominal home, and we are all so fond of him! I mean she is, and I am so glad to see him! He is so amusing."

"An amusing companion is always, or generally, a welcome guest, but I would not like to be valued only for my power of amusing people. Were I Mr. Pelham, I should resent being valued chiefly for that recommendation."

"Oh, I did not mean that, I assure you. Mr. Pelham is worthy of being liked, and respected, and esteemed too, by all who know him, and we have almost grown up together, so I ought to know."

There was something in her whole tone and air so earnest, and yet so shy and blushing, that it jarred and irritated Caleb beyond endurance, simply because it confirmed his fears. He was always rash and impulsive, now he was off his guard, and unhinged. He said bitterly—

"'Liked, respected, esteemed!' Fortunate man. There is but one more point to be gained, if it is



not already accomplished. Loved!" and he fixed his eye on the girl beside him.

In an instant her brilliant colour faded from her cheeks. She was deadly pale, and anger, such as he had never seen her betray before, was marked on her features. She drew up her slender figure until the mantle of her dignified grandmother seemed to invest her.

"Mr. Williams—you presume! How dare you?" and then tears came to soften her. "Because you saved my life, you presume on it, and think you can say anything to me! It is too cruel, it is almost mean, because you know I cannot—I cannot treat you like other people. If I did love Mr. Pelham, what is it to you? He has neither father nor mother, nor sister nor brother. No one to love him with family love. He is worse off than I am, though we are both orphans. What if I did love him? The companion of my childhood! Who has a right to question it? Not you, certainly, even although you did save my life at the risk of your own. I did not think you could have been so cruel!" and Ethel burst into tears and sat down on the bank.

"I cannot go to Mrs. Mildmay like this; she would ask the cause of my crying, and I don't

want to make her angry with you. I have only half an hour left, and I was going to ask her to come up and meet Gilbert,—Mr. Pelham, I mean, and Mr. and Mrs. Grymes. I wrote to them before I left home.”

Caleb had stood, petrified into silence by this outburst. What could he say or do to restore the *statu quo* of their old standing? This had been the first question, but it was but a feeble barrier to the full tide of his own pent-up feelings which swept it away with overwhelming power.

When he spoke again, it was in a tone and manner quite new to Ethel. All the old obsequious deference was gone; his voice was calm and low with the calmness of concentrated passion, and the earnest dignity of one who had a right to ask the question which had roused her indignation.

“Ethel, you do me great injustice. I do not presume on any imaginary obligation; I esteem it no obligation to have risked a life valueless to me, but which I believe has still a mission for which it is spared to perform,—a mission of which your welfare is the object and end; you have no male protector.”

"I beg your pardon. I have an uncle,—and others too."

"Well, none except your uncle, who is absent, and does not quite fulfil his office, it appears to me; but I will not yield, even to an uncle, the right I have of being, though a humble *employé* of your family, your best friend, the most interested in your welfare. The time may come when I may tell you more. I have been betrayed into saying too much to-day; but I must throw myself on your generosity, and entreat you to forgive what is not a liberty, if you knew your claim on me to watch over you. I must throw myself, too, on your *honour* not to betray, even by a hint, what has just passed."

In a moment Ethel's thoughts were diverted from the original cause of her emotion. She looked puzzled and perplexed.

"I don't understand you. I don't see what right you have, what right you can possibly have, but one, and that you refuse to admit. I am not angry now, however; you must have some reason, and you must tell it me. I don't like secrets and mysteries."

"Then I cannot tell you, because it is a mystery and demands secrecy. I cannot burden

your young life with a secret too terrible for mine to bear, and on which human life and human happiness depend. This much I will tell you,—I came here solely to watch over Charles Chetwynd's daughter. I enact a *rôle*, and have adopted a mode of life solely to this end; and if, in a moment of excitement, I have betrayed myself, I can only, as I said before, throw myself on your mercy. One word of suspicion cast on me, one unguarded suggestion that I am not what I seem, would ruin me, would ruin others near and dear to you, would sacrifice the happiness, if not the life, of some of your nearest relatives. But I am saying too much; promise me that you will never mention this interview."

"Who are you, and why do you care for me? I have no secrets from Grannie; I must tell her."

"You have one secret from your grandmother, and that I have discovered against your will. God forbid that I should ever urge you to conceal anything from her that should be told; and yet I must now *charge* you not to say one word to her which would recall the past,—a past you know nothing about yet. Unintentionally, I was

your greatest enemy before you were born, your father's enemy, your mother's enemy, and now all that is left to me is to atone to you, to watch over you, to shield you from inherited misfortune, if it should ever overtake you or threaten you. For this end I ventured to probe your feelings for Mr. Pelham ; and believe me, if he or any other man who is true and worthy of you, wins your love and Lady Agnes's approbation, no one will be more thankful than your humble old drawing-master, for then I may say, in the words of Simeon, 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace!' I am dead to the world, Ethel ; but promise me to seek me, and me only, if you want a friend."

"You are a strange man, and I hate mysteries and secrets from grandmamma ; but I will have faith in you, I will never say one word of this to any creature, and will be just as if it had never happened, if I can. I would not injure you, and there is nothing that she can mind in my silence. You may trust me."

Ethel put out her hand to ratify her promise, and he looked down on her with an emotion which nearly overcame him as he pressed it between both of his.

"Oh, what shall I do! I was going to Mrs. Mildmay's, and now it is so late."

"I will take your message; she is to meet Mr. and Mrs. Grymes and Mr. Pelham at a late dinner. Good-bye. Remember, I was your father's friend, and enemy,—for my folly helped to wreck his life; remember, that were he here, he would still entrust your interests to me. Will you trust me?"

Her hand was still in his.

"Yes, I will trust you; only some day you must tell me all, as I know so much. I hate mysteries, and your whole secret will be far safer with me than the half,—I think I could help you better, if I can help you at all."

"Some day, with God's help, you shall know all. Now good-bye, and try to compose yourself before you see any one."

He dropped her hand, and was gone before she realized that she was standing in the middle of the walk by the river, with the babbling waters on one side and the high bank of laurels on the other, alone. Half an hour before, she had come bounding down the hill without a care, and full of the anticipation of meeting Gilbert; now, Gilbert was forgotten, while vague, undefined fears

and troubles had been dimly foreshadowed to her; her own sweet secret torn from her heart and discussed, and then left as a trifle, beside those greater ones which that strange man seemed to hold over her, which seemed to portend anything but happiness to her.

"Wherever there is mystery there must be wrong somewhere to hide. Oh, how I wish he had not spoken to me, to-day at least! Who is he? How, when, and where did he know her father? or could it be all a dream?" His strange, agitated manner, his vehement appeal to her, his tender, reverent, almost paternal address, came back to her as she still stared at the vacant space he had just filled, and tried to realize the full extent of his mysterious admissions.

"Well, staring into vacancy will not enlighten me! I must get home;" she turned, and turned to meet Gilbert Pelham.

"Gilbert!"

"Ethel!"

He had been close behind her, and was watching her with anything but a satisfactory expression.

"Pardon me. I fear I have interrupted a

pleasant little *tête-à-tête*, in which I should have been *de trop*. Still, Ethel, I must claim the privileges of old acquaintance to remind you that, although you are very young, and may not know it, you are still too old to be shaking hands in that sort of way with a man of that class."

"Gilbert, he saved my life once at the risk of his own; and besides, if you knew, if I could tell you,—but I cannot; only will you believe me when I tell you that there is no harm in it; that—that—he is a very superior person indeed; and—Oh, Gilbert, will you try and forget that you saw him, and promise me, as a *great* favour, not to tell any one? It is not my secret, indeed it is not; it is his, and I promised not to mention it. Oh, promise me too, dear Gilbert!"

"I see what it is; he is practising on you for the sake of that old story. Better to have paid him handsomely at the time; I always said so."

"You're quite wrong; he would accept nothing. Only promise me on your honour."

"On one condition, Ethel."



## CHAPTER V.

## A PERPLEXING CONDITION.—SECRET LOVE.

“UPON one condition, Ethel.”

But Ethel did not answer; she seemed to be only engrossed in diligently counting the pebbles in her path, but she was in a wild tumult of feeling, such as she had never experienced before. That strange man whom she had always liked,—to have been actually her father's friend, and coming about her in disguise! It was a romance which few girls of her age could have withstood. His trust in her, her promise of secrecy, then Gilbert's sudden, inopportune intrusion on them, his suspicions and disapprobation of her, and then his *one* condition, what could it be? She could think of nothing which she would like to say by way of reply; she only knew that she was

in a terrible dilemma, and did not know how to get out of it with honour.

“ Ethel.”

“ Yes, Gilbert.”

“ I said on *one* condition I would not betray you.”

“ You have no right to impose any. You came on us unexpectedly.”

“ Us ! has it reached that, Ethel ?”

“ Yes, ‘ us,’ Gilbert, for we were two. He was telling me something he did not wish any one else to know. It is nothing to me, Gilbert, and I don’t know what it is to him, only I ask you not to speak of it—of meeting us here to-day—to any one, or he will think that I have betrayed him.”

“ What can he, a travelling artist, a common photographer, have to tell you in confidence ? Ethel, you were very wrong.”

“ You would not say so if you knew how it all happened ; but you must put faith in me. It is time to go and dress for dinner.”

“ But the condition, Ethel ; I make no promise but on that understanding.”

“ You have never told me what it is. I never make unconditional promises.”

"Can you not guess?"

"I never trust to guessing, for I always guess wrong."

"Well then" (but on the brink Gilbert hesitated about committing himself), "well then, I ask no condition; I will keep your secret for the sake of the love I have for you. I would not for worlds have any one know I had interrupted you in a confidential *tête-à-tête* with that fellow."

"Gilbert, that is what *you* call love for me! To sneer at me for something you cannot understand! No; if, after knowing me so long and so well, you cannot believe me when I tell you all I can in honour divulge, and ask you to trust me for the rest, then the long years we have known each other as playmates and friends have told you little about me;" and Ethel turned from him with disdain, and walked quickly towards the house. She was terribly wounded and mortified; she felt he had some grounds for questioning, but none for doubting her.

"Stay, Ethel darling, just one word."

But Ethel would not stay or listen to him; she held her head high, and walked on with a step as stately as it was swift.

Gilbert could not stand this; he was not to be

conquered in that way; a few hurried strides, and he had overtaken her. "Ethel, dearest Ethel, it is only because you are more to me than any one else in the world besides, that I could not bear to see you doing what any one would condemn. I dare say the man told you some stories of his sufferings and troubles, and you listened to him in charity; only don't shake hands with him again. *My hand*, perhaps, Ethel. One I shall claim some day, when you are old enough to give it, if you will."

His arm had stolen round her waist, and there she let it remain; his lips stole nearer and nearer as he spoke, and then touched her cheek. Her heart was overflowing with all her varied and tumultuous emotions, and in a second all had been changed as if the sun had burst out on a storm. Oh, the ecstasy of being thus loved, and by him! She could not repulse him, for if she was to be his wife, why should he not kiss her? Still, she said nothing. Her rigid truthfulness was tried by the case he supposed, for it was not quite the truth, and could she even tacitly deceive him at the very moment he was claiming her as his own? But Gilbert had dismissed the photographer, and was thinking only of the step he

had taken. She looked more lovely than he ever remembered to have seen her,—not handsome, he said, but “lovely,”—the colour glowing in her cheeks, and her eyes shimmering with tears, while a blissful smile was on her lips now. It was very jolly to have reached this stage in an impromptu manner, and still to have her in check by the condition he still would indirectly impose. In the very moment when most men abandon themselves to the softer emotions of the moment, he was counting the strong points of his game, and the weak ones of hers,—of that sweet, pure, priceless gem, the heart which was fluttering in wild ecstasy at being claimed as his, at the delusion of his love.

“Yes, Ethel, I mean when you are old enough, to ask Lady Agnes to give you to me; and then we could both manage to take care of her. You need never leave her while she lives, unless you like it. Of course it is too soon yet for a regular engagement. You must be presented at Court and go out in society a little before you can be regularly engaged.”

“Must I? Is that always necessary?”

“*Selon les règles* it is, in our set, you know. But what does it signify? You can love me all

the same. We have grown up to love each other as we never could love any one else. Have we not?"

And the glowing cheek pressed itself just a little against the soft moustache and lips already almost touching it. It was her mute answer.

"Well, then, you have *two* secrets to keep now. As you keep ours, I will keep yours with him. It will be my test of your good faith. Of course the whole county have decided on us as 'a match' (which was not true), but I only want for the present to go on as we have been doing, without telling any one we are engaged to each other (which, except privately, we are not you know), without that dreadful uncle of yours casting his evil eye across our paths, which he will infallibly do if he suspects us. I did not intend to tell you so soon—how—how completely my heart was set on this, only it has come out, and now we must keep our own counsel until you are old enough to marry. I think Lady Agnes likes me. You know that best, however."

"Oh, yes; she is very fond of you, Gilbert."

"Yes, I think she would sooner give you to me than to any one else, so your conscience need

not trouble you with any doubts about her, but it would be a frightful bore to be before the world, booked for a year or two as engaged—watched at every turn—and yet so sweet to know it ourselves!”

And Ethel agreed with him. She never could bear to be paraded as “engaged;” she would like to tell Grannie, and Nellie, and no one else; and she told him so.

“No, Ethel! If you tell Mrs. Mildmay, a stern sense of duty will compel her to watch every glance we exchange; and as to dear Lady Agnes, because she cannot watch, she will fidget herself to death to know how we do it! No, Ethel, except that we understand each other’s feelings—(did they?)—and know our future hopes, let things remain as they have hitherto been, for a time. Indulge me in this, and our own secret happiness will be greater—just for a while, at least.”

Ethel’s heart was too full of her newborn happiness—she could refuse him nothing, even if the imperative deep gong which was reverberating from hill to hill had not told her that dressing for dinner was an unavoidable necessity, if they either of them wished to escape detection. She

was a shy country girl, and had not yet learned to value the *éclat*, the triumph of parading her conquest—of carrying about her captive knight as a proof of her prowess. To her, the ordeal of admitting her love, and as he said, “being regularly engaged before people” was too terrible not to be thankfully postponed. She did not know how “an engagement” would interfere with Gilbert’s market value in that great matrimonial emporium, Belgravia; she did not know of the cold shoulders which would be his portion, of the acidity which would immediately be ascribed to the grapes which it had been her blissful privilege to cull; she only felt certain that she was the most fortunate girl in England to have secured his love. Then Caleb’s questionings and warnings cast a chill blast over her exultation. How strange that he should be thinking of Gilbert, and have exactly guessed his intentions and feelings! How much stranger that he should not realize what a great match it was for her, in a worldly point of view, for Gilbert had not been slow to insinuate his estimation in the market in his confabs with her grandmother in her hearing. These were her reflections, when, after a tender but hurried parting, she was



hurrying home ; she did not venture to go to her grandmother, but ran straight to her own room to dress. Here she was exceedingly unmanageable as to the arrangement of her hair, and generally dissatisfied with her dress. No longer angular and bony, she was almost majestic in her person, though slender, and with room for more filling out ; her complexion had cleared, and although not fair, the greys and purples of her shadows had assumed a warmer tint, and contrasted well with the dark luminous eyes and her soft rich varying complexion ; and her firm, well-cut chin, with its dimple, gave her an expression of decision and strength of will which suited her style even in its extreme youthfulness.

“ Oh, Miss Chetwynd ! If you would just please to keep your head still, I should be done in half the time ! ”

And this hint from her maid, and the dread of the immediate arrival of the guests, kept her steady, so that she might be done with, and get down before they came.

“ My lady is in the drawing-room this quarter of an hour, Miss. ”

“ Yes, I know, but I was so late ; just put that

rose a little higher ! it sticks out too much on one side."

I'me sure you need'nt mind, Miss. Only the Wicar and Mrs. Grymes, and they'll never notice ; and as to Mr. Gilbert, he is just one of the fam'ly. No company to speak of."

Ethel's colour rose until her glass told her how she might be betraying herself if a shrewder observer were present. She put up the backs of her hands to her hot cheeks.

"Oh, how warm and flurried I am. I ran up the hill so fast, I could not help being late !"

"My lady was wondering what was a keeping you, Miss."

"I am sure I am a figure, but never mind. I will get cooler soon."

And Ethel ran down to be just in time to meet the Grymes' detachment of the party as they came in from their pony-phaeton, and to avoid the questions of her grandmother as to Nellie's coming, which she must have answered had she been earlier.

Gilbert had watched his time, too, to slip in after the irrepressible lady, whom he knew would monopolize the conversation at once. Up in his room, "jolly" as he still thought it, to have re-

served the refusal of the heiress of the Priory, and all the stolen enjoyment which the step secured him, he had come to the conclusion that he had been rash and precipitate, not true to himself in his want of caution. She was a girl to be proud of; a conquest which, under certain conditions, he should feel no compunction in leading about and exhibiting; but still there was, he knew, a cloud somewhere over some family transactions in former times. He took himself severely to task for being so spooney as to plunge into the thing at a moment's notice, without first investigating the nature of that cloud. It was not often that Gilbert Pelham felt guilty, or questioned the wisdom of any of his actions, but on this occasion he certainly did sit in judgment on himself, and after mature deliberation returned a verdict of "devilish spoony" on the delinquent.

He had paid his *devoirs* to Lady Agnes on his arrival, and before, at her suggestion, he had gone in quest of Ethel; so he joined the party as quietly and naturally as if he had been there a week, and had not, as he facetiously said to himself, "been and gone and done it" in the short interval since his "return home."

The Vicar was one of the best and most consistent of country clergymen; his heart was so entirely in his work that for years he had neglected his own comfort and remained single, working day and night in his parish. There was Mrs. Mildmay, whom he once thought would have made him an excellent wife; and if she had put herself in his way, or if a friend had given a helping-hand, he would have asked her; and, perhaps in those days, she might have accepted him, and thus secured the comfort both required at home; but he had no time to go out of his way to woo a wife,—a “fellow-worker in the vineyard,” as he called her. But there were district-visitors, who were also “fellow-workers” under him; and one of these, by patient efforts, after years of associating with him, and steadily applying herself to that end, *accepted* him one day. When and how he proposed he could not call to mind, nor could she, only she assumed that it had been done; so he thought that he must have done something to mislead her, said something she had misunderstood, and therefore he was in honour bound to fulfil her anticipations. She was an experienced “fellow-worker,” and, therefore, the parish was perhaps fortunate in

securing her, and he to be congratulated in finding her in his path, without the waste of valuable time in searching for a helpmate for him; so they had been married now some two or three years, and she had been certainly indefatigable in looking into, and taking in hand, all the affairs of the parishioners, high and low.

Lady Agnes did not like her much; but they all venerated the Vicar, and therefore endured her for his sake. On this occasion she had come determined to "have it all out" about that man—to seize on the occasion of having Mrs. Mildmay and Lady Agnes together to dash into the subject boldly. It was a rare chance for her; and human success depends much on our seizing our opportunities as they occur; so she came all smiles, hope beaming in her pale green eyes, and smiles extending her faded lips from side to side.

Ellen's appearance in the distance reassured Ethel. Gilbert would have very much liked to know the exact amount of understanding between those two. Although Ethel had only been favoured with the hope of his being hers on some future occasion, yet he had no compunction in feeling now that she was his own exclusive property;

and he was, consequently, jealous of any word of confidence she might have with any other mortal. He was, therefore, on the *qui vive*, and drank in eagerly every word addressed to, or uttered by, either of them; and Mrs. Grymes, unintentionally, at once edified and mystified him at the same moment. As soon as the exigencies of the table gave a moment's pause in the talking she exclaimed,

"Oh, Mrs. Mildmay! I am so charmed with your artist friend! and with all that has been said of him, and all the curiosity he is exciting by his intimacy with you. I mean *all*, of course" (and she swept in the family with an impromptu circular look, roused by something not be mistaken in Nellie's face). "I never knew, until he told me, that he was some connection of yours; at least, I think that was what he said."

Ellen, with all her self-control, could not help betraying something not flattering to Mrs. Grymes in her expression.

"I think you must be mistaken. I don't think it possible Mr. Williams could have claimed to be a connection of mine, although he was an old friend of my husband.

"Was he, my dear? You never told me that," from Lady Agnes.

"People often meet and know each other for years before they discover these things. When my husband knew him he was in a very different sphere; I never expected to meet him again so mutilated, and a travelling artist."

"Oh! then you knew him, too, after all? I think you are quite right to be kind to him; I would never deny *my* poor relations, it is so mean."

"I quite agree with you; and if Mr. Williams were my brother I should be proud of him. I knew him in his boyhood and youth!"

"Quite a romance, and quite a hero! Well, I am glad to be able to understand the thing better. You must excuse an old friend and neighbour, you know; but as we are quite *en famille*, there is no harm, I suppose, in saying it (and Mrs. Grymes seemed to regard the two men-servants as animated automata). I assure you his visits to you have attracted such attention that everybody is talking about it. I am very glad to have them accounted for, and to hope still that we are not going to lose you from among us. I shall contradict it."

Lady Agnes had been turning an acutely listening ear to first one and then the other. Could Nellie have been so foolish as to have been making herself conspicuous with that artist, and have concealed from her that she knew him before! And Ethel, her darling, always there? No; she could trust to Nellie. It was that evil woman's tongue.

"What do you know of him, Nellie? It is all new to me."

"Little more of him than you do, I think. Recently he has told me of his early wish to be a painter. Circumstances preventing this, and the mutilation he suffered in some adventure, he could not pursue his studies, so took to photography instead. He is a gentleman by birth, though his vocation is followed by all classes; and I never could treat him as anything else under any circumstances."

"Yes," said the old lady, "his voice is undoubtedly high-bred. I have always listened to him with pleasure, for his voice has an indescribable charm for me. I am sure I have heard it before, or something very like. One thing must place him in an unexceptional position towards us,—he saved our darling's life."



Meanwhile Gilbert cast searching though furtive glances at Ethel, whose colour rose painfully, tinging her ears and forehead.

Could she be in Mrs. Mildmay's secrets, and was she a party to anything going on between those two? Ethel looked conscious, he thought. Widows occasionally made fools of themselves, and if in this case Ellen was doing so, what a school for his future wife! He would worm it out of Ethel sooner or later; and yet, if it was her friend's secret, it was only honourable for her to try and keep it.

Then Doctor Grymes, who was usually taciturn in his wife's presence, saw that the conversation led by her for some reason was not tending to pleasant results; and consequently he came benevolently to the rescue, by asking Gilbert some question as remote as possible from the subject on the *tapis*.

But Mrs. Grymes had done her work. The astute youth put two and two together, and recorded the result in his mental notes; and Lady Agnes had "just a little something to say to Nellie when she could get her alone." And altogether that gentle dame felt her position trying, and her *savoir faire* and coolness taxed to the utmost.

Ethel, in the delirium of her mixed feelings, was conscious of that odious woman's making matters worse about that poor mysterious friend of hers,—her poor father's friend now,—and yet she dare not speak, dare not even look, for fear of betraying guilty knowledge. Secrets were dreadful burdens !

Mr. Jones, the grey-haired butler, who ministered to his blind mistress's wants with tender care during every meal, had the full benefit of all that was said ; and, after duly pondering the matter, came to the conclusion that, " though he never had nothink aginst Mrs. Mildmay, yet he must say that while she was livin under the protection of the Priory, she shud'ent demean herself by keeping company with sich-like tramps." And John, the footman, thought, " As Mrs. Mildmay missed the parson, maybe if the hartist ad two hies he would be better than nothink."

Meanwhile Mrs. Grymes was quite satisfied with the effects of her observations, for had not the Vicar held up that woman as a model for her ? " Pretty model, indeed !—carrying on such a game at her age, and with a young creature under her care !" She would let her know what the whole parish thought, and that people were

not *all* blind in Woolerton, though some were, and she tried to throw sand in the eyes of the others! She never could make out why she insisted on living alone. She was quite sure always that Lady Agnes would have preferred her taking up her abode at the Priory. *Now* she could understand it!

However, the dinner went off well, in Ethel's opinion, for no one had discovered her own secret.

Gilbert was upon such terms with them all, that it required keener eyes than the Vicaress's to see—even if she had not been more deeply interested elsewhere—that *the* crisis of that girl's life had just been passed,—that the Ethel of the evening was not the girl of a few hours before.

There was music after dinner; so the party was divided, and Ellen kept apart from her tormentor, who sat beside her hostess, and toadied her for the rest of the evening.

Ellen's quick eye alone discovered a change in Ethel; but she knew from Caleb what had passed, so she accounted for the "something" so palpable, yet so undefinable, without associating it with Gilbert. In spite of his "notes" and his suspicious curiosity, Gilbert had been surveying

his new acquisition, and congratulating himself on the good taste he had displayed. He had been considering the gem in its setting, and he felt quite as if the Priory was as much his own already as her affections were. He loved the old place for itself, and he might be pardoned for so completely identifying it with his bride elect. It was his crotchet,—the weak place in his brain,—of which we are told there is one at least to be found in the most sane human head. When they were all gone, he was pleased to sit and chat with the old lady, tell her the news, and at the same time hold Ethel's hand in his,—against which she dared not protest, if she had wished it, nor even against his pressing her to his heart, and calling her his *own*, when they said "good night."

A week passed, and Gilbert lingered on, and Caleb Williams was all but forgotten by the lovers. Rides, walks, and other means of enjoying a *tête-à-tête*, and their own absorbing society filled up the time. Gilbert had contrived to take it for granted that Ethel was to be presented next spring, and come out sooner in the country. This he did in a decidedly paternal tone to his old friend, thereby giving form and distinctness

to the hazy ideas which had been germinating in her own head for some time. As to the "coming out," it might begin a little in the country at once, as there were always *al fresco* festivities in the summer, where she would be hailed as an acquisition; and these ideas she confided to Nellie at the same time that she took occasion to enter upon that other little question we know of. I don't think Nellie was *quite* as communicative as she might have been, but then she had honour deterring her from making a clean confession. Upon the whole she escaped wonderfully; and in proof of the confidence reposed in her, she was elected to *chaperone* Ethel to a coming archery meeting a few miles away, which came off every year.

Ethel was an excellent shot at home, and would create a sensation anywhere. The beauty of Lady Agnes's heiress required little to enhance its value, but hers was a figure to show to advantage on an archery-ground, even if her ascribed expectations had not been sufficient to invest her with all sorts of imaginary attractions.

The Priory had been let when "that unfortunate affair" occurred. The neighbours remembered that there had been "something amiss

among the younger sons," and that one had been lost at sea—that was all; no one had ever connected the name of that petted and idolized grandchild with guilt or shame; and although Lady Agnes knew that, sooner or later, a time must come when the law would have its say in the arrangement of her affairs, if only for Robert's delectation, until the time came for these private investigations, it was not necessary that the world should know how the insane wrath of Angus Douglas had complicated the difficulties of his grandchild's position.

Ethel had never heard a word to disturb her sense of security, or to give her that painful distrust of her social status which blights the lives too often of the innocent heirs of a heritage of sin.

"All I have is to be yours, my darling. Your uncle got all the entailed property, and your aunt her own and her poor sister's portions; besides which, her husband is wealthy. My Charlie's child must have all his old mother can give her for his sake, and because he is not here to take care of her." But before she had said this to Ethel, all Woodlandshire had known of the will that had been executed to that effect—had heard

of it in that general way which leaves no clue to the source from whence such rumours emanate-- "Some lawyer, of course ; they always know." And Robert at least had had it from the fountain-head, but he did not know the exact phraseology of the document, nor could he discover its resting-place.

It had been, as he flattered himself, only a wasteful expenditure of parchment, to gratify a morbid sentiment of his mother's, until those photographs reached him. Then he felt that there were sunken rocks ahead not indicated in his charts--dangers the existence of which were certain, though their positions were so harrowingly vague and undefined ! While a doubt existed as to the legality of his brother's marriage, a will which did not provide for the alternative of Ethel's illegitimacy would be waste paper or parchment. Would his mother think of this ? She might ; but he knew her too well to imagine that she would condescend to recognize the possibility of a doubt. She would, he felt certain, ignore it. On this chance his hopes had rested ; but if there were certificates extant, these hopes were dispelled at once ! ' Who held them ? They went down or were consumed in

the fire in which his brother had undoubtedly perished on the broad Atlantic, unless he had given them to some of his associates,—some survivor who held them as a lever to extract money from the highest bidder on either side—who was biding his time, perhaps, until they were wanted. Again and again he identified Caleb with this dangerous and “unprincipled” schemer, who was evading him on every occasion, and baffling every effort he made to communicate with him. He felt that he had been most impolitic in the “Miss Chetwynd” scenes long ago, and might have awakened his mother’s attention to the salient points in her position; he did not know *how* much (or how irretrievable) had been the harm done at that time; he must be more wary in future. And now Ethel was approaching womanhood; her marriage was his next and most imminent danger. A settlement duly executed, and all was up with him for ever. He *must* return to England; he *must* get his mother into his own hands; he *must* let that girl have such temptations as *might* lead her to relinquish the pinnacle on which the foolish, doting old grandmother had placed her; and then rose up a vision of Gilbert Pelham as a possible suitor,



and, as such, his rival for that coveted Priory. Boys reared with girls seldom fell in love with them, though it was a case of temperament generally; but then there was the bait! Gilbert had occupied for some time a position, but a sluggish, slumbering one, in that chaos of horrors, Robert's brain. Other things had become so absorbing and imperative, that he had been thrust quite in the background among the imps, fiends, and other small devils and torments who planted thorns in Robert's pillow, and followed him about in sunshine and darkness, in tumult and silence, mocking or pitying or threatening him always. He had consequently no prevision of the imminence of the danger from that quarter where he was; at the same time, though at some hundred miles' distance, coming to the conclusion that his presence in England was necessary for his own interests, and that he had not much time to lose.

## CHAPTER VI.

## A DECLARATION OF FRIENDSHIP.—COMPLICATED MYSTERIES.

AN apparently trivial and unimportant correspondence with Doctor Grymes had led to, or at all events confirmed, Robert in his determination to visit England once more. He had written to the Vicar on some pretext or other, and had sent him some trifling *souvenir*, at once recognizing the good man's worth, and his own position as a sort of patron of the living ; and then he had asked him for his *carte*, and a photo of the church and vicarage to complete a set which he was collecting of scenes in the family properties. The *carte* was especially for Dora, he said, who remembered him so well, and was so grateful for his kindness to her when in Woolerton.

The best and most unsuspecting men are often the most open to flattery ; they know too little of the wiles of the worldly to detect it at first in the odious slimy coils by which it essays to encompass us. The good Vicar was only gratified by the compliment, and his wife elated ; Caleb was at once called in, and it had been on this occasion that Mrs. Grymes had compared his production with one of the homes of the blessed, and which had provoked Caleb's irony.

Mrs. Grymes herself had written a letter, in addition to the one in which the Vicar had expressed his double gratification in being so kindly remembered by the son and granddaughter of his most valued friend, and by the opportunity thus given him of employing Mr. Williams, towards whom Mr. Chetwynd's family seemed bound by ties of gratitude beyond those which unite the employer and employed. He thought it would please Mr. Chetwynd to know that the highly-finished and, altogether, admirably executed view was that gentleman's work ; and " Laura," his helpmate, put in her little effusion, as she said " the Doctor was so very busy with his parish work." And Laura, too, launched out about Caleb in praises which were well weighed,

and calculated to put Robert on his guard as to the "goings on" in Woolerton; stabbing intentionally, through a velvet sheath, somewhere, but, by reason of doing it in the dark, little dreaming that her random shafts would take effect exactly on the most vulnerable spots. If she had only known in time of the early intimacy with Mrs. Mildmay's husband! but the letter had been dispatched before the little dinner at the Priory, and therefore this satisfaction had been denied her. She had contented herself by alluding to Caleb as to one with whom "rumour," or, rather, "the hateful gossip of Woolerton, which was like the winds, the source of which no one can trace," "gave hopes of claiming soon the high honour of being one day more definitely allied, (though in a humble way) with the family we are proud to claim as *our* own especial family, than by the debt of gratitude for dear Miss Chetwynd's life, which has been such a lucky debt for him!—(Mrs. Grymes corrected herself)—a BLESSED debt for him!—a debt the whole parish owed him, and which, rumour said, Mrs. Mildmay was about to cancel." "Do not, my dear Mr. Chetwynd, give ME as an authority for this,—I only give you what is flying about the neighbourhood

from one idle mouth to another ; for myself, I assure you I have quite enough to do as the wife of our dear Pastor, without interfering in the matrimonial arrangements of my neighbours. In *my* opinion the thing is impossible, bearing in mind the respective ranks of the *parties*, though *poor*, and no doubt *you* will be better informed on the subject than I can possibly hope to be. I wish our most estimable neighbour all the happiness she deserves, under the circumstances," etc. etc. etc. (and that was little enough in Mrs. Grymes's opinion).

The bait had taken, and with a vengeance ! Robert had not only ascertained that Mr. Williams was again at Woolerton, but that his suspicions were correct, and that he was carrying on some game with that plausible, hypocritical widow !

The photo was the one we know of. The vicarage, a quaint old building with modern improvements and additions, standing on an eminence ; trees, with the village church seen between them, and, in the foreground, the apostolic figure of the good old man whose bald head and white beard were so effective when combined with the benevolent and intellectual contour of his fea-

tures. "An improvement on the last production from that quarter ; but, nevertheless, my fine fellow, I don't intend you to escape me again. I shall drop down on you, and find out what you do know, and buy you off if I can ; but you shall not know I am in England."

And now, to discover the photographer's antecedents became for the time the ruling passion of Robert's life, if he could obtain this, and unsuspected ; but the dread of betraying his aim was almost as powerful a counteracting influence as the aim itself ; and between these rack-ing, conflicting motives, Robert was driven almost distracted.

In vain did he search his memory for some one who could have developed into an avenging fiend, such as this mysterious correspondent might be, or become. He could only think of two persons who could possibly be cognizant of the scene portrayed in the terrible photograph ; one a short man, thickset and red-headed, the other, undersized and flaxen-haired. He had every reason to believe that both these men, after escaping with their lugger in consequence of a certain affray, had been drowned at different times while pursuing their dangerous calling ; so,

at least, he had been told by their accomplices, old confederates of his own, with whom he had suddenly broken off all questionable intercourse when Nellie Baldwin's murder drew attention to the locality of Ottermouth as a likely harbour for smugglers. If these men were still alive, and were in connection with the photographer, where did they get the certificates? Could his brother have left them with these men, or one of them; or could he have lost them and these men have found them while Charlie was in their lugger? This was the most probable solution of the mystery, and it was easy for them to have secured an accomplice in Caleb; some broken-down man of original respectability, but who had lost caste, and become *one of that lot*. And then again he doubted; for would not the desire of extracting money have been sufficient inducement to them to have long ago offered them to Lady Agnes, or himself, as they were documents valuable only to the family? Then, again, there was, or had been, the girl, the mother; perhaps Caleb was an accomplice of hers.

Robert had never troubled himself with particulars of "that Douglas lot." Now he regretted the omission! There was no telling what changes

might take place in the opinions of a man who selected deliberately for his daughter the direct disgrace of a breach of the Seventh Commandment, rather than the indirect slur of a connection with one suspected of violating the Sixth. Such a man Robert thought was capable of anything; and they might choose, that father and daughter, if it suited them, to claim Ethel now as heiress of the Priory, and eat their own words in doing so. They might be his unknown correspondents! Charlie had been capable of any folly, in the opinion of his surviving brother, but he could see no object in his parting with such documents, except at the point of death. If this had been the case, why did those entrusted with them not boldly come forward and try their luck, instead of sending copies in such a way as to preclude the possibility of his purchasing them; and, then, why *that other thing*? And thus did he oscillate from one probability to another.

A schemer himself by nature, he could only imagine a sinister object in others, where a mystery was apparent. The ground beneath him was mined. How was he to countermine? Then, after vainly conjecturing every probable and improbable contingency, he came back by a circle



to Caleb. Who was this man? What did he know? How would he use his knowledge? And if he had any hold on him, Robert, what was he waiting for? Why did he not commence operations at once? Show his game, and put him out of the misery of suspense and uncertainty? What would this man hope for by injuring him? Deep lines were showing themselves in Robert's sallow face, never handsome, but now bearing too evident traces of those internal conflicts which invariably leave their traces behind them.

Strangers turned and looked at that face, and wondered what secret history was struggling to reveal itself; while those who knew him said, "A run of ill luck was telling on his health."

That he was "breaking up, physically and financially"; that "the Jews were worrying him," and that a fellow like Chetwynd "should take things more coolly," he should "be more jolly over it, and plucky." Such comments would occasionally reach Robert's ears, and they did not soothe his troubled spirit; but it was while wincing under their combined effects that he suddenly returned to England.

Ethel had been so absorbed by her new interest in life, that the photographer and his mys-

tery had faded from the surface of things, especially when she found that Gilbert had dismissed the subject from his thoughts, and seemed entirely engrossed by herself. At first, she had dreaded further questions from him; and Mrs. Grymes's insinuations about her dear Nellie and the photographer had added to her curiosity about him; but in a few days she had resigned herself to her one present object in life—the luxury of being beloved, and of giving back the most passionate devotion in return, although the feeling only found expression in passive abandonment to its indulgence. She fairly revelled in the sweet pure emotions of her heart, in which she felt justified in indulging towards the young man her grandmother esteemed so highly, and who was to be her husband some day.

Gilbert had forgotten the artist and Mrs. Mildmay, and all such insignificant people, and their affairs. Mrs. Grymes had, as he thought, solved the mystery to him. The conference between the man and Ethel was, no doubt, about the widow; and now Ethel had her own love affairs to think of, she would have no time to interest herself about those of others. So he lounged about all day under the trees, and

smoked with or without the ladies' company; and he paid court to Lady Agnes, keeping her interested and amused, while Ethel, all but silent, literally basked in his smiles, or shyly blushed under his gaze, which was unrestrained by her grandmother's presence.

Gilbert had told Lady Agnes that he was quite "used up," by a spring in town. The late hours did not agree with him, and that a week or two in the quiet and retirement of "home" was a necessity to him. In fact, he never was so happy as at the Priory; he seemed to fit in to it, and its dear inhabitants, better than to any other place or people. The associations about it and them were the dearest he could ever know. He had no higher aspiration than to be one of them, and he thought that some time or other his hope might be more fully realized.

Then she smiled a gratified smile, and said young men changed their opinions sometimes, and that the monotony of the place must pall on him in the end.

And then he said more vague things, inferring much, and yet leaving himself a safe retreat, all in a voice so low and confidential that the younger lady could not hear him. . And then he satisfied

himself, and Ethel too, that he was doing everything in the most open and straightforward manner. He said he was not diffusive in his attachments; he supposed he was endued with "locality" and "concentrativeness," and all the other bumps which signify fidelity to the same objects; but that others were not like him. For his part, if he ever married, he would be quite sure first that he was loved with an enduring affection. He did not care to be the object of an ephemeral fancy, and then, when it was too late, find out his mistake; he always liked to look ahead, and see that his way was quite clear before he took any rash steps.

Then, he would run up to town for some *fête* worth the trouble of attending; and in a day or two he would be back again, talking of going away every day, and yet lingering on. The fact was that he was falling more deeply in love than he believed possible; and he enjoyed the whole situation so thoroughly, including the contemplation of his own cleverness in bringing it about, that he was in no hurry to relinquish it.

Ellen Mildmay began to suspect that matters were coming to a crisis; Caleb knew that that crisis had passed, but even to Ellen he would

not betray his knowledge, obtained as it was by unintentional eavesdropping. Caleb had been haunting her footsteps and worshipping afar off, gloating over what he coveted and knew he dare not have. Oh, how we covet those good gifts which we cannot enjoy! how we crave impossibilities, — things which if they had been amongst the blessings God had strewn in our path we might have cast aside as worthless, or at least have neglected!

There was something very touching in the idolatry with which that man regarded the young girl, who seemed to be his one object in life. The very restraint he was compelled to put on his feelings seemed to give them intensity. Oh, that he could claim her openly before the world and adopt her as his own child! Oh, that he could do this, and do that—do anything but grovel there, as if the highest and noblest objects his wrecked life had ever known were sins!

It was in one of his watchings and reveries that the lovers had come on him suddenly and passed him by, too deeply engrossed in their own happiness to notice the grey figure prone on the ground near the river; but he had seen them and heard words which convinced him that they were all the world to each other.

Caleb had bowed his head on the turf beside him and wept,—prayed, in his own impassioned way, that the man might be worthy of her, that God might watch over her and shield her and make her lot a happy one; and then, “Lord, when my mission is accomplished, let Thy servant depart in peace; release me in Thy good time.”

Caleb’s prayer was heard, but not as he hoped or expected. There was still work for that weary, desolate man, whose life for so many years had seemed a useless pilgrimage; absorbed in one aim, and that a secret one, his whole existence had seemed to those who knew him one without hope, or tie, or end, except that of existing; but his work was before him, though he knew it not.

One day when Gilbert had gone to town Ethel took the opportunity of running over to the Cottage, where she had not been for some days, as her regular lessons had been abandoned, and Nellie did not pay her daily morning visit as formerly. She meant to have a quiet chat with Nellie, while dreading it all the same; but instead of having her *tête-à-tête*, she found Caleb seated there with her. When she saw him all he had said to her, all Mrs. Grymes had said of

him, and all she had thought came rushing to her mind at once. She felt awkward and confused. Could Ellen be really going to marry him? If he were only something better than a poor travelling photographer she would like it; and what would Granny think of it? and how would Gilbert like it? There was therefore a considerable restraint in her manner to both, with all her kindly feeling to Caleb, and love for Nellie.

It is natural, when we are conscious of some great change in our own selves, to imagine that every one sees it too. Ethel fancied that she was betraying that wonderful something, and her eagerness to seem as usual gave her a false, constrained manner; so the weather was buffeted about and battered in its present, past, and future aspects, until the combined ingenuity of the three could do no more; then Lady Agnes's health served as a topic, and then there was a pause.

Then Caleb rose, as if his subject was too exciting for him to discuss it in a sitting posture.

"Ethel, I told you when we last met that in you was centred my chief interest in life; I betrayed myself sooner than I had first intended,

for while youth lasts it is a pity to cloud it prematurely. From what I have since heard, however, some explanation would have been forced upon me by that charming lady at the Vicarage, who has taken those whose welfare her husband neglects under her care; I have told her all she need know, and it is quite true as far as it goes. I tell you now that I came here solely to see you sometimes, and that Mrs. Mildmay has been in my confidence from first to last. How to thank her for what she has done for you and for me I know not. I must tell you, for her sake and my own, that I have a wife living; and this fact affords an insurmountable barrier to the arrangement which the clerical lady contemplates for our mutual benefit; and I am deeply grieved that what has been only charity and sympathy on this kind friend's part should have attracted the observations of that vulgar-minded and ignorant woman. If I could throw myself at the feet of your dear old grandmother and tell her my tale without injuring others, it would be a greater happiness than any I could ever hope to enjoy again. Were I to do this, I should bring shame and remorse to more than one very near and dear to you both. The grave has closed over your



father, Ethel, and to her he is still a dearly-treasured memory; it would only grieve her to renew a past of which she understood but little, and which can never be recalled or retrieved. I must warn you, however, that there are trials before you of the nature of which you can form no idea, and that *I* alone can help you in them, and when the time comes, even if I sacrifice others, I will not fail you."

A pin might have been heard to drop as he said these words in a tone of forced calmness under which deep emotion was visible.

Ellen Mildmay sat and watched Ethel, and Ethel listened with parted lips and breathless attention.

"Oh, who are you, and what is going to happen?"

It was terribly exciting to one so young, reared in such placid seclusion, to hear words of such threatening import; doubly hard after the past week, during which she had been exalted above all human care or anxiety by love.

"I have told you I was your father's most intimate friend and his greatest enemy—your enemy, though I never meant to harm you; and the one thing left me on this side of the grave is

to atone to his child. Now I have trusted you, I have put myself in your power, for I am outlawed, and there has been a price on my head ; my life is still in danger, and one unguarded word might betray all. Promise me not, even to our dear friend here, ever to allude to me except as heretofore—as the old travelling photographer. The honour of two families are in your keeping now.”

“ I promise—if God will give me strength—to be faithful ! Thank you, thank you very much for the interest you have taken in me.” And once again in spite of Gilbert, Ethel’s hand was clasped in his, and this time it was pressed passionately to his lips, and covered with scalding tears.

“ Ethel, you have never known a father’s love, with all your sentiment towards your ideal parent ; let me be to you as one who, ‘ could love fulfil its prayers,’ would place you beyond the reach of care, and be proud to fill a father’s place to you.” Ethel was deeply moved. The passionate devotion of the man, his penitence for some unknown sin, the shadow over him, and his anxiety to atone for the past, all touched her heart. She could have

knelt to him, and have tried to comfort him if she dared—but she remembered Gilbert; remembered that she was a young woman now, and must guard her expressions of feeling. She could only stand and utter incoherent words of comfort, while Nellie sat quietly by and wept in her chair. Nellie, who had been obliged to put a strong curb on herself, and to use all her native strength of character, to prevent her from betraying more—Nellie, who could have uttered one little word, and by doing so could have brought happiness to those she loved, and have paid off old scores with those whom she hated as much as a good woman can hate any one, —Nellie only wept. She had *promised*, so she held her peace.

. Then the two ladies went up to the Priory to discuss with the old lady the grave question of Ethel's costume at a coming Archery meeting.

Again and again had Lady Agnes pressed her cousin to relinquish housekeeping, and take up her permanent abode at the Priory. The Cottage she said was Nellie's for life, but she could let it, and have the rent. When she first went there she had two children—one Evelyn we know died there, and her boy had before that perished in

China, where he was serving as a midshipman. Now she had no ties, and she would be a comfort and an acquisition to them to have her always; but Nellie held out firmly once more when the old lady renewed the subject now, on account of Ethel's approaching *début*. "Command me all day, dear friend, all night too, when you want me, but let me still claim some little corner as my own especial home."

"Nellie, you know how people talk,—an unprotected woman is fair game for idle gossip; they dare not talk of you under my roof, it will be a protection to you."

"Thank you, dearest and best of friends, but I hope never to deserve to be talked about by any one whose censure would be reasonable; as to that woman, she would malign an angel if it suited her. Don't think me ungrateful for declining your offer, but it is easier to give up one's little nest than to construct another. You know you have other ties besides Ethel, and I may not be as welcome to all, as a fixture, as I know I should to you and to Ethel too. If at any time you wish me to accompany you abroad, I can shut up or let my little nest, furnished, but let it be my own still, without offending you."

If Robert Chetwynd was one obstacle to the arrangement proposed, certainly with Nellie, Caleb was the chief one; her home was a refuge to him in dark hours when human sympathy was essential, and who could give it but herself?

She knew, too, that the time might come when her home would be a refuge for Ethel; but, with Lady Agnes, the hint about her "other ties" was sufficient; Nellie should never be exposed to Robert's mercy.

"My dear friend, you are right. Keep your home and your independence, and give us all your company as a daily visitor; Ethel wants you, for they will be talking about her next,—and the crimson which suffused Ethel's cheek, told a tale of something to be "talked about." She turned away from Nellie to conceal her confusion. Ethel was now burdened with two secrets, neither of which she could tell her grandmother,—she who would not willingly have concealed a thought from her of her own free will! Was she right?

In Caleb's case perhaps she was. Nellie never would have countenanced anything that was wrong, but then there was Gilbert. She had doubts about his share of her entanglement.

She felt guilty when the idea of a clandestine love affair presented itself to her. She felt humiliated, and the glamour which this first most intoxicating passion had thrown around them was not sufficient to dim her clear judgment of right and wrong,—but then there was the *condition*,—half withdrawn and half held over her head. If she violated her promise, he might doubt her even if he were too noble to betray. How hard to be entangled against her will with mysteries not her own, while she had not a thought she would not gladly have confided to those who lived only for her; and now with all her dearest and best beloved she must have a reticence! From each she must conceal the confidences of the others, and she was only eighteen! It was too hard on her she felt. Fortunately Lady Agnes had not much penetration, and attributed her preoccupied manner to anticipations of her coming *début*. Each of her other friends supposed their peculiar confidence the cause of her embarrassments, so she was saved from all interrogations, and the accompanying pain of what was to her prevarication.

Living then in an inner life, utterly apart from the outer one into which she was about to enter,

Ethel began that new phase of existence into which a woman passes when she is, as it has been profanely said, ready for the matrimonial market. We repel the idea with scorn, yet all over the world the same thing is going on under different conditions, and each British matron when the time comes, under a more or less transparent veil, accepts her Kismet and offers her goods, prepared to be seen to the greatest advantage. The blind old lady was no exception to this rule. That her darling should surpass other people's darlings in all that could recommend her to the admiring eyes of men, was an object, as eagerly pursued as if she had not in her heart of hearts the purest, and the highest, and the noblest *sentiments* and theories of what the marriage tie should be. We are the unconscious slaves of custom, and we dare not violate its laws; we *cannot* with impunity.

If Ethel's marketing had been accomplished already by private contract, if she had been bespoke like a picture at an exhibition, like that same picture she was to be displayed, held up to admiring eyes for a given time, and the envy and admiration of the world was to be so much incense offered on the shrine of her fortunate

possessor's vanity, a commendation of his choice.

The girl's utter unconsciousness of all this made her ten times more enchanting; her interest alone was centred in what Gilbert would think of her, and her anxiety lest she should be too rustic in her manners to please his fastidious taste.

She knew that, next year, if her Aunt Pelham came home, she was to be presented at Court. This was a duty Lady Agnes felt that she owed to society, and to Ethel, as a public recognition of her grandchild before the world. It was an indispensable form, and in the utter darkness into which she was now plunged, the old lady pictured to herself a vision she had once seen reflected in many mirrors, and she wondered if her darling resembled it!

And then she would pass her hands over Ethel's head and face, and *feel* if she could trace that resemblance, and then she would kiss her, and tell her how she loved her, and charge her to tell her all that concerned her happiness.

"All the sorrows of my life have grown out of concealments. Confide in me, my dearest child, if you ever have any trouble or grief."



And then Ethel would feel that she was wicked and ungrateful, and yet that it was not her fault. Many bitter tears, the first that were ever really bitter, were shed on Ethel's pillow when she thought of her secrets, and her reticence from her grandmother. Which was the greater sin? these, or the betrayal of confidence reposed in her? she could not tell; but she kept the secrets, and prayed God to forgive her if she were wrong,

## CHAPTER VII.

ON THE BANKS OF THE THAMES.—THE  
ARCHERY MEETING.

THE season was on the wane. People were going out of town, some of them to villas and cottages, and other retreats, away from the bustle and heat and dust ; among flowers and trees, yet still within reach of all the gaiety which remained for them,—*fêtes*, lawn parties, archery, and the new game of croquet, just coming in, being the order of the day.

Gilbert fluttered among them ; his full purse, and the railways placed at his command all that was going on in town or country. He should have liked very much to see Ethel “ out,” but it would not have done this year. It was too late, and she was *too* fresh, and a little country society would

take off that "something" very charming among green fields, but still too countrified and unsophisticated for his *fiancée* to display in town.

With that wonderful wide-awakeness of which he was so conscious, and with which he was so satisfied, as indeed he was with everything pertaining to Gilbert Pelham, he congratulated himself on the manner in which he had managed affairs. He had secured her fresh young heart (and he was fully aware of the value of that), and had still left himself open to be courted a little longer as an eligible; he had besides reserved for himself the power of looking into the business aspect of the thing, and seeing his way clear before him before he committed himself finally.

He had told Ethel that "*when she was old enough*" he intended to ask for her as his wife; she had only been told of the honour he intended to confer on her on some future day, he had not formally asked her yet.

He had been absent from the Priory a week, and had just determined upon returning there, when coming out of his club he happened to meet Robert Chetwynd, who had just arrived in town, and intended taking a day or two previous to "dropping down on them," at Woolerton sud-

denly. Gilbert detested Robert, and avoided him generally on all occasions, but his aunt-in-law's brother was a near connection when it suited him to recognize the fact at all. He wanted to sound Robert on those dark passages of family history over which he knew some veil had been drawn; so, meeting him face to face, he proposed a dinner at Richmond in a day or two. This invitation Robert gladly accepted; he wished to know how things were going on at Woolerton before he appeared among them, and yet he did not like the news of his arrival in England to precede him. He therefore remarked to Gilbert,

"Don't mention my name if you write to the Priory. My dear old mother grudges me a day in town, and always expects me to pay my *devoirs* to her at once,—and I really have business to attend to first."

To the "two or three other fellows," who were to meet Robert at Richmond, Gilbert added a few ladies, so that the party was increased to rather a large affair by two rival dowagers and more than two young ladies, unconscious of it themselves perhaps, but whom these veterans were pitting against each other in the maternal scramble for the *parti* both had determined to catch.

Gilbert blandly submitted to be angled for, and smiled equally on all, and thought of taking them down a peg next year, when *his* choice was displayed. It was quite disgusting, he said to himself, to see the way in which those old women showed their game, and thrust their daughters upon him; he did a fair and equal quantity of flirting nevertheless with each, while he did not for an instant neglect Robert. It was his *rôle* now to pay him great deference and attention, so much so that after dinner the familiar spirits which haunted Robert faded away out of his immediate presence, and seemed only as things that had been for the time.

In the cool, long, summer evening the party broke up into little knots, each matron putting in for the prize, but somehow neither succeeded; to the "other fellows," some of them rather detrimental, fell the honour of escorting about the young ladies, while Gilbert found himself *tête-à-tête* with Robert on the banks of the Thames, smoking, and discussing scenery, pictures, and other small talk, each waiting for an occasion to drift into his own subjects of interest quite by accident.

The scene before them gave Robert the first chance.

"By the bye, there was a fellow who was a *protégé* of my mother's always loafing about Woolerton. Is he there still? He used to be good at this sort of thing." And he waved his hand towards a choice bit of water and trees.

"Yes; I saw him there quite lately, taking views. He is in as high favour as ever,—especially with Mrs. Mildmay, I hear."

"Ah! there is no convincing women of anything against their *protégés*; but that fellow is, I have reason to believe, an impostor. He takes good care not to let me catch him there; he always makes himself scarce at the sound of my name,—I would give ten to one that he is off on the first notice of my being in Woodlandshire."

"You surprise me! Mrs. Grymes was quizzing Mrs. Mildmay rather broadly about her patronage of him, and she accounts for her share of the intimacy by claiming a previous acquaintance. She says he is a man of good birth, reduced by misfortune to the necessity of earning his bread. It seems her husband knew him in better times."

"The deuce he is! But her old acquaintance may be a villain for all that. Some women are such

consummate fools!—when they are not knaves or devils; they are sure to be one or the other.”

This was Robert's theory, and he felt a satisfaction in propounding it on every occasion, especially to any young man, whom he might be able to influence. But Gilbert was “wide awake” always; indeed, when he slept was a question to himself. He “always saw his way clear before him;” and he thought he knew more than one woman who was neither fool, knave, nor devil; so he said—

“The ladies of your acquaintance, and especially of your own family, would be obliged to you, if they knew your flattering opinion of their sex. I know some of them who belong to neither of your divisions.”

“Fools, I assure you, every one of them, more or less—weak, gullible, amiable fools; I hope so, at least.”

“Miss Chetwynd seems to promise to turn out an exception. She is beginning to create rather an interest in the county. She has appeared at one or two country gatherings, and was rather admired. Fine girl, rather.” And Gilbert was very off-hand and artless as he said this.

“Ah! yes. That is an unfortunate case, and

my poor dear mother has made a terrible mistake about that poor girl, in her ill-advised charity and tenderness for my brother's memory."

"How so?" asked Gilbert, puffing slowly, and intent on his cigar.

"Why, it was all very well while she was a child; and no doubt, with my poor mother's infirmity, it has been a great comfort to her to have her always with her; but it has been a great mistake to bring her up to a position which she can never fill."

"A position she can never fill?"

"Well, as you are a connection of the family, and seem to have been kept in the dark, too, I may as well tell you in confidence that, although my poor brother wrote to say that he was married to the girl's mother, there is no proof of it; on the contrary, her mother's family have never claimed to establish the fact. My mother accepts my brother's assertion, and treats her as if she were his legitimate daughter; but of course at her death the law will take a legal, and, I fear, a very different view of the case, and any little fortune she may leave her will be withheld. My mother's jointure dies with her, and the Priory reverts to me."



"Poor thing!" said Gilbert; "she does not know it."

"No; and there's the rub. My mother would turn me out for hinting at such a thing, if she heard me; and it is in these things I say that the best women are *fools*." And Robert did not deem it necessary to mention the mortgages and other encumbrances held by his mother over his reversionary interests.

Half doubting him in all his assertions, Gilbert was thunderstruck at what he felt might be true. He had been asleep after all! Poor dear Ethel! What a blow to her when she knows it! But Gilbert had no time for indulging in sentiment; he recollected that he was most inhospitably neglecting the ladies his guests, so he returned to them, and was most equitable in the division of his *petits soins*, leaving them each and all in a state of uncertainty, bewilderment, and hope, as to his ultimate intentions. Then he went home, to think over what Robert had "dropped out so accidentally."

Gilbert disliked Robert. He doubted him in many things; but if the Priory was to revert to him, as well as the jointure, it was clearly his interest to conceal the bar sinister on his niece's

escutcheon, and to get her married off as soon as possible. Gilbert sought in vain for a motive for this communication from him, and, judging men by his own standard, he came to the conclusion that Robert was a garrulous fool to let out this piece of family scandal even to him. Gilbert, very wide awake now, could see how weak this man was who was attempting to mentorize *him* ! And then the organ which did duty in his economy for a heart reverted tenderly, in spite of him, to the girl who so loved and trusted him ; and he pitied her, with all his power of pitying any one, for the loss of her home and of her lover, which she some day must experience ; for, of course, marriage with him was not to be thought of, if it were true. He pitied himself, too, for the fall of his own airy castle, and for that weak place in himself which, unsuspected, had led him to the very verge of committing such an error of judgment, and made him feel uncomfortable now. " Sold, by Jove ! for once, or near it."

Gilbert spent hours in ruminating over his mortification,—the mortification of discovering that his boasted wide-awakeness had been insufficient to protect him from the weakness inherent to man. He could not get rid of the bright

vision of the girl who so loved him, as she flitted before him in her bright *espièglerie*, or as her soft, tender, loving glances haunted his spirit, reproachfully, as it seemed, when he tried to dismiss her image. Had he been as straightforward as he was wide-awake,—had he sought his bride honourably,—he need not have burned much midnight oil in the vain attempt to solve in his brain a problem which, in a few moments, Lady Agnes would have dismissed. Had he given her the opportunity the old lady was only too anxious to obtain, she would have told him frankly her intentions, which were, to leave Ethel the Priory or settle it upon her at her own death, unless Robert could redeem it by paying off the mortgages. He might, too, have heard some of the particulars of Ethel's birth, and other matters of family history, had he walked by the light of honour, but he preferred to trust to his own wide-awakeness, and, with his eyes very wide open, he fell into Robert's snare.

On the other hand, Robert felt that there might be danger in Gilbert, and, as a connection of his sister's, felt it was his duty to put so young a man on his guard; so he said, at least, but his familiar spirits would hardly have given this ver-

sion of the affair ; it was the one paraded ostentatiously to that outer self, in which we all try to believe, and it was the version he would have given had any one alluded to that little *tête-à-tête* while the two men were admiring the view together.

“ I have put that scheme out of his head, if it was ever in it ! He will never marry her now. Think of that rascal being there again ! Refusing my commission, and then going there to attract attention by his intimacy with that she-devil Nellie ! I always hated her as a girl, and I foresee she is to be my Nemesis now.”

But Robert was too well versed in the ways of the world to enlighten his unsophisticated young connection as to his private opinion of the lady in question. It would not have served his purpose to identify her with the devils to whom he had alluded, but alone with his imps who always returned as soon as he was out of the presence of other men, he felt that she, this quiet cousin of his, was one of the most active of the legion which tormented him.

There was nothing more to be gained in London, and he might lose valuable time, so he would just run down at once ; he would see his mother

and Mrs. Grymes. The latter might throw some light on the movements of that man; to the former he would not scruple to speak his mind freely, and express a strong opinion as to the impropriety of permitting him to frequent the place as he thought fit. He would denounce him in the neighbourhood, and then, if Mrs. Mildmay chose to brave public opinion, and continue to encourage him, she would do so at the risk of losing his mother's good opinion; for he flattered himself she belonged to his *first* class among women, and that he could convince her. He did not call his mother "a fool" even to himself, but he only admitted of three classes, and was too dutiful to degrade her to either of his two last ranks of the sex.

Before the great Richmond dinner had come off, the Woodlandshire Archery Meeting had taken place at Sir Guy Dacre's. Lady Dacre was Lady Paramount, and it was deemed a suitable occasion upon which Ethel might appear, so Lady Agnes had but to signify her wishes and that lady was only too glad to welcome the young heiress. So it was arranged that Mrs. Mildmay was to accompany Ethel, and after some deliberation and consultations, it was ultimately de-

cided that she should attend the ball with which the day was always wound up.

Roger was in a great state of excitement. The equipage in which they were to proceed to the Dacres' Park, which was ten miles away, underwent a polishing and furbishing-up which, judging by its general neatness and well-appointed condition, it certainly did not seem to require, but it was the old man's way of showing his sense of the importance of the coming occasion,—his young lady's first appearance in "grand company."

The day before the *fête*, a note couched in very humble terms reached Sir Guy; it was from the photographer, requesting permission to take photographs of the meeting by the instantaneous process.

Caleb had made wonderful progress in the art since his first bungling attempts, and he now proposed sending these views to the 'Illustrated News,' he said.

Of course Sir Guy assented, and ordered a dozen copies for himself of each view, and promised to sell as many as he could to his guests; so Caleb had *carte blanche* given him to come and go as he pleased.

He was there then when Ethel arrived, looking like Diana, if we can picture that goddess in crinoline, over which white muslin, relieved by green ribbons, floated, and in a white felt hat of Spanish form, along which a green feather swept and fluttered in the breeze. Her tall supple form showed to advantage with her bow in her hand, and the moment chosen by Caleb for his chief picture was when she was in the act of shooting, and forming, with two less attractive girls, a prominent group in the foreground. Gilbert, too, was there, for he had run down by rail, and he was standing near them with young Guy Dacre, both looking on while she shot; and if Ethel missed the target on this occasion, she certainly inflicted a more enduring wound on the heart of that young man by a random shot, for Guy Dacre never, after long years had passed over both their heads, forgot the vision imprinted on his memory that day, while months of study could not have produced a more effective picture than the sun recorded in a second or two on the photographer's plate.

The artist was in ecstasy; he made one or two more attempts, but that one success was his *chef d'œuvre*.

He stood awhile gazing on the bright scene be-

fore him, watching the adopted child of his imagination ; the treasure-trove which he had rescued from the surging river ; watching her, afar off, watching Gilbert's eye, and the satisfaction and approbation his face expressed ; watching the eager frank face of the young squire, his father's heir, who was at no pains to conceal his admiration of the bright apparition before him.

"If it had only been this last one ! I like his face better, and I am somewhat of a physiognomist ! and yet if she loves Gilbert, and he is only worthy of her, perhaps it may be best for the dear old lady ! Well may she be called 'Ethel,' the noble hearted, for she is true as steel, and a gem any man might be proud of. She is too good for him ! too good !" and thus musing, he hovered about the outskirts of the archery ground until he could think of no further excuse, and he was obliged to obey the summons which called him to a luxurious repast, but not with her,—not among those with whom he might have claimed an equal place. He was among those who occupied a debatable ground between the more clearly marked ranks of society, and his little *déjeûner*, served, as it was, by an obsequious domestic, choked him in his efforts to swallow it.



He did not see the ball, but Ethel satisfied Gilbert's fastidious taste on that occasion. She was a fine girl, showy by reason of her height and carriage, bright from her beaming smile, and joyful silvery laugh. Alas! that he was incapable of appreciating her greatest gifts.

These dormant beauties of character Gilbert could not see or appreciate—they were in truth but latent—seed sown in a rich soil and silently fructifying. The time had not come for such plants to flourish; they are watered by tears and strengthened by the storms of adversity, but their influence, however unseen, gave inexpressible charm to her manner.

It was all sunshine now to Ethel, for was she not basking in Gilbert's smile? waltzing on his arm? Had she not one sweet dream, dearer because it was secret? She feared so.

The enjoyment of Gilbert's position lost nothing of its piquancy by the appearance of a rival in the field. He saw that Guy was "hard hit," and it was incense on the shrine of his own vanity; for the young man had just returned from abroad, where he had enjoyed opportunities of forming his taste as regards women. Guy had known Ethel as a little bony child, he had

seen her as what he then called irreverently "a gawky, long-legged girl," when he came home from Harrow. Then he had gone abroad with his family, and when Sir Guy and Lady Dacre had returned home with his sister, he had lingered on in Italy, varying his amusements by excursions in Greece, and by trips to Palmyra and Baalbec, to the giant ruins of Egypt, and even to the Upper Nile with different parties of friends, and yet he had brought back with him his dear, honest, manly heart unscathed. He was what all his friends called "a thoroughly good fellow," rather fond of studying history critically, and by the light of ancient monuments, and liable therefore to be chaffed by his companions on this special hobby, but he was such excellent company, so gleeful and jolly, at the same time so unselfish and considerate to all about him, that he was beloved and sought for by every age and temperament. He was about Gilbert's age, and they had been in the same house together at Harrow, so that it was natural that they should fraternize, now that he had returned to take up his position as the heir to an old baronetcy, and a first-class property and position in the county.

He had not met Ethel since his return until

that day, when she seemed to burst on him an embodiment of some Greek divinity with all an English girl's freshness and exuberant health. He certainly was, as Gilbert assured himself, "hard hit," and that worthy youth congratulated himself on being first in the field, and having secured a position which he defied all the Guys in England to eject him from, if he chose to avail himself of it.

It can be easily imagined, then, what a shock Robert's communication gave to his dreams of the future; for, with all his love, the Priory was still the inevitable background of all Ethel's portraits. It was, in fact, an inseparable appendage to her with almost every one; so that she was voted the beauty of the day by general acclamation, that accessory being tacitly understood, and the general admiration pleased and gratified her; they increased Gilbert's devotion to her, and consequently everything had combined to make her very happy.

On their return after the ball, Ethel had to tell her grandmother all she could remember, or repeat, with whom she had danced, and how many shots she had scored, and who won the prizes, and what these prizes were. Ethel had

been too nervous to make good scores, and there was one shaft which had not been included in her score, but she had taken the county by surprise, with her beauty and fine presence. Old men spoke of Lady Agnes, and said that she was worthily represented by her grandchild. One said that her own daughters were all Chetwynds, a plain race, but that Ethel was a true Wilbraham—"High blood!" "High-bred girl!"

Ethel did not hear these observations, but Ellen Mildmay did, and she had her version to give when alone with the old lady.

"Nellie, tell me how Gilbert and the darling got on together. Those two puzzle me; sometimes I think he means something, in fact he has hinted as much to me, and he seems very fond of her. Is it only brotherly love? Nellie, you can see how they *look* at each other,—that is the test; I could tell in a moment if I could only see them together."

"Were I to judge by his attention to her, by his looks and hers, I should say they were both attached to each other; when I hear them speaking there seems to be only the same old perfect understanding of brother and sister. He puzzles me more than she does."

"Ah! they have lived all their lives on such familiar terms. That makes it puzzling, and she is so young, but if he cares for her he should secure her at once, she will be sought for, Nellie. You will see that my darling will not be left long on my hands, and although I shall pine for her, I want to see her settled before I die. I want to see her safe in the hands of some one I can trust; for somehow Robert don't like the child, he don't know her, and he is prejudiced against her—jealous, perhaps, for all I have to leave I have bequeathed to her. Robert has enough of his own if he knew how to manage it, and he would be as badly off if he had four times as much; besides, I want her to have this place as her own, and I think Gilbert would care more for it as it stands than any one. Nellie, if I die soon, tell her husband, whoever he may be, that they must keep it unless Robert pays up. While I live, of course, things must remain as they are, but I want my child to have all I leave behind of my belongings in these old places, just as if I were here still, as I may be in spirit, for who knows? Marion would upset everything, and disturb the genius of the place, unless she is very much changed; she used to be so fussy.

“Why talk in that strain?”

“Because Robert is always worrying me about some German oculist who, he says, can remove the cataract. I have positively refused to leave England, but he comes sometimes to this country. Blanche is coming home soon; Mr. Pelham will take a house in town, so I am trying to accustom my mind to the prospect of some change. I feel this pleasant quiet cannot last much longer. I think if it can be done in London that I may be induced to try that oculist, if it were only for the chance of seeing my darling before I die—of seeing myself as it were renewed in another generation. I should like to dress her in my old court costume, and see myself again! ‘Vain old woman,’ you will say, Nellie; but when one is thrown back on memory and imagination, when one has not the passing world to amuse one’s eye, it is natural to live over again one’s past life,—the pleasantest passages of it at least, and I was considered a great beauty in my day, Nellie; even that old sinner your friend Thackeray has been showing up, was among my admirers! Ah, well! the world has improved since then, and with a good woman setting a noble example at the head of society, virtue ought to become the fashion.”

And so she would talk on about this time, after the archery party had given a fillip to her memory, and Nellie would listen, and then Ethel would come and join in.

Oh, if she dare only tell them of her happy prospects ! it seemed so cruel and selfish to keep it all to herself, when it would add so much to their gratification ! but then, she had promised, and Ethel's honour was pure and untarnished, and her simplest word had ever been binding, so she could not break it to Gilbert.

## CHAPTER VIII.

THE PRYOR FAMILY.—BLANCHE PELHAM'S  
POLICY.

MEANWHILE changes were impending for all; some anticipated, others of which no one dreamed.

Mr. Pelham had determined to return to England, perhaps to retire, at all events to recruit his wife's health. They had spent their summers at Simla, and had enjoyed other privileges not accessible to many civilians in India at that time, so that they had kept their children with them or near them, and he had still a liver, the existence of which was not always intruding itself on his attention; like many other good servants, it did its duty so regularly and faithfully, that it was all but forgotten.

Not so his wife; her liver, that Indian rebel,



was still faithful, it is true, but her general health broke down,—she was weak and failing and debilitated, and Europe was her sentence, or its alternative, death.

So they came home overland, stopping in Egypt to see the Nile, and then at Malta, taking easy stages, and enjoying themselves by the way.

At Malta they met an eccentric old gentleman and his family, English by birth, but with little vestige of his nationality remaining.

As a very young man he had left England, poor, and in disgrace with his family; he returned in a few years to claim an inheritance which successive deaths had caused to fall to his lot. He came in November, and spent that month in arranging his affairs in London, and in looking at his property in Lincolnshire, but the season was unusually gloomy. There was no one in town; he felt himself an alien and friendless, the sting of former *snubs* was still rankling in his heart, he would not hold out the right hand of good fellowship to those who would gladly have accepted it now, but who in former days gave the cold shoulder to his poverty and wildness, so he turned his back on his home, and went once

more to the sunny south, making Palermo his headquarters, but wandering in the far East, and becoming each year less like an Englishman in his habits and feelings. Long after his fortieth year, he met a countryman of his own travelling with a beautiful daughter in Syria. This girl was young enough to call him "father," but what mattered that? The shy, reserved man poured out the long-garnered treasures of his heart to that pensive beauty whose listless sadness first created an interest in his half-oriental soul. By the sheer force of his powerful will he made her his own. She did not love him; her heart was buried, she felt, in a grave over which swept the broad Atlantic; but she was under the spell of his stronger nature, and there was no sympathy between herself and her father. She married him, and their princely home in Palermo henceforth had been the admiration and wonder of Sicilians as well as of all visitors to that beautiful city, although they lived in a sort of exclusive grandeur which suited his habits. Now there were symptoms of that fearful but brilliant struggle which was to free that island from the Bourbon rule. Mr. Pryor's sympathies were with the hero whose name was to be a watchword

throughout Europe ; but he had stronger sympathies still for his own personal comforts. If England was in perpetual fog, as he had worked himself into believing, still there was peace in it ; so, as his wife's father had died and left a Scotch property to their second son, he thought he would once more try to exist in the vapoury atmosphere of Britain, for a time at least. His eldest son would inherit his own fine estate, and they ought all to get used to fogs and rain and snow, so they let their palace, and went to Malta rather suddenly to catch the steamer to Southampton. Mr. Pryor could not stand European land travelling ; he could not ride a dromedary from Marseilles to Calais, and that, he said, was the only bearable mode of progression for him, so they were to proceed by the steamer to Southampton. At an hotel in Malta they met the Pelham family, and became acquainted with them while waiting for the arrival of the mail.

Mrs. Pryor was still a very lovely woman, though a southern sun had tinged her cheek, and the lilies had long since faded from her brow. She was a good wife, placid, gentle, and submissive, knowing or seeming to know no wish but her husband's pleasure,—fond of her children, with a

tender pensive fondness, and with an air which impressed an observant stranger with a vague idea that "that woman had had a past,"—a history buried deep in her soul, the shadow of which still dimmed the brightness of her present lot.

"Every blessing earth can give, that woman seems to have; her husband adores her, and lavishes money and presents on her; she has fine children, and has never lost one of them; she is going to England, where she can get all that money can give, and yet she looks as if she was gnawed by some consuming inward grief. There is something on that woman's mind, you may believe me."

This at least was Mrs. Pelham's verdict, delivered to her husband in a connubial *tête-à-tête*. Mr. Pelham liked a pretty woman, and had a habit of indulging in a sort of courteous gallantry, which meant nothing more than the chivalrous deference a true gentleman always feels for the other sex, or rather used to feel, for that old-fashioned sentiment is "going out" in these fast days when the sexes are assimilating more and more in their outward bearing.

Mrs. Pelham was not jealous, certainly not,—she had too much mind to indulge in such weak-

ness; but she always felt a "deep interest," though, perhaps, curiosity would be a better term for the feeling with which the objects of her husband's *petits soins* always inspired her. She "always liked to find out what was under the surface of such people," she said, meaning those whose manner in any way was a contrast to her own. Blanche ~~Pryor~~ <sup>Pelham</sup> was by no means as "sharp" as she imagined herself, but she had sufficient penetration to see that Mrs. Pryor had passed through the furnace of sorrow and suffering at some period of her life. She seemed a safe acquaintance for George; she liked her and she did not feel at all uneasy when he devoted himself to her, for she could see that she would take his attentions only as they were meant, and not plume herself on a conquest, and then triumph over her, which evil, real or imaginary, is so hard for a wife to bear; so she patronized Mrs. Pryor, too, in that magnificent queenly manner which had become quite natural to her from her husband's position in India, and which she fancied she had inherited from her mother, Lady Agnes, whose native dignity she remembered with admiration, but whom she never could aspire to equal in any personal quality. Mrs. Pelham, therefore, patro-

nized her new acquaintance, and Mrs. Pryor, with all her wealth, was, ivy-like, glad to have something on which to lean or to which she could cling; for all her husband's wealth could never have inspired her with sufficient spirit to patronize even a governess, so they got on wonderfully well together, and, by the time they reached England, were intimate friends, and determined to improve and perpetuate the friendship which had extended by a slower process to their husbands. They were all together at an hotel at Southampton, an hour after the steamer arrived, and waiting for the landing of their luggage, when Mrs. Pelham suddenly thought that she ought to send a telegram to "Mamma."

"So stupid of me never to think of it before George went to the Custom House."

"Mr. Pryor will have it done for you, I am sure, with pleasure, if you will write it."

Mrs. Pelham wrote hastily, "All arrived safe and well at Southampton.—Blanche W. Pelham."

"You have forgotten to direct it."

"Oh, how stupid of me! See, dear, if you can read that?"

But why did Edith Pryor turn pale and tremble, and fall back in the chair from which she had just risen?

"My wife has still her 'sea-legs' on, and seems quite tipsy," remarked her husband, from the other end of the room, where he was lazily glancing over the 'Times.' "Quite suspicious among strangers," and he came over and patted her on the shoulder, fondly, as he took the telegram from her hand and read out:—

"The Lady Agnes Chetwynd,

The Priory,

Woolerton,

Woodlandshire."

'Quite correct, Mrs. Pelham, is it not?'

"Yes, thank you, quite. Dear Mamma is blind, and having little to amuse her, time seems long to her. I must write them a long letter before post. I write to my niece, who lives with her, and is a great comfort to her. You must know them all, dear Mrs. Pryor, some day."

But dear Mrs. Pryor seemed in no mood to appreciate the prospect of these new acquaintances. Her husband had gone, and as soon as she lost the support of his caressing manner, she had lain down on the sofa, pale and cold, not fainting, for she was conscious; but, as Mrs. Pelham said, "really more upset by landing than she ever had been by sea-sickness," so she bustled about,

ordered her refreshments, some hot drink, and half a dozen other restoratives before she would leave her with her maid or go to look after her own children and ayahs and natives of the other sex, who were wandering everywhere and anywhere, and required her presence to restore order among them.

An hour afterwards, when she returned to her meek friend as she called her, she found her pale still, but better, and rather inclined for her society, so she brought her writing into her room, and talked at intervals as she wrote.

"Yes, poor dear Ethel, she is an orphan. Lost both her parents in her first infancy, so she has been with dear Mamma ever since she was born, and, I think, she loves her more exclusively than she ever loved one of us. She had us altogether, you know, and my brothers were, like most young men, hard to manage and always getting into scrapes.

"But this dear girl writes charming letters. I quite long to know her; her photo is very pleasing. I think, indeed, she will be quite a beauty. I really long to see her and poor dear Mamma," and her pen flew as she was jerking out all this in stray sentences.



"There, Miss Chetwynd! I flatter myself that missive will be welcome to you as well as to your grandmother. Poor dear girl, I feel like a mother to her, and she must be lonely."

Mrs. Pryor had risen from her sofa and had been wandering about the room, nervously looking out of the windows, and then into the mirrors at her own haggard face, and then fidgeting at the writing-materials as her friend talked on.

"Now, I must ring for a stamp, everything seems so strange to us Indians," and Blanche got up and rang, an unwonted exertion to her. While she did this, Mrs. Pryor took up the letter and looked wistfully at the direction; oh, that she could kiss it, and send her unconscious salute to that child,—and she was to see her, to know her as her friend's niece, and yet she was to be to her as a stranger! This was more than the worst that she could have dreaded when her husband's determination to visit England had cast that spell over her,—the dread of detection.

"My dear creature, how ill you look! Do lie down again!"

And then Mrs. Pelham renewed her fussy attentions, and her victim had to submit.

Oh, why had she not told her husband at first

of the secret of her early life ! Why not have confided to him a history in which folly and indiscretion, though not guilt, were mingled ! It was too late now ; she had deceived him too long ; and now to enlighten him only through fear would make him despise her. She must shut up her heart and keep in her secret, if she hoped to live with any show of outward peace. But she was a true daughter of Eve ; and this child, like all forbidden fruit, because she could not claim her, was dearer than her fine, noble boys, and the little interesting dark-eyed Edith, who looked up into her mother's absent countenance for love, and was scarcely satisfied with the secondary affection she read there.

Edith was a kind mother, but the almost preternatural instincts of her little daughter told her that all mamma's love was not for her. The little creature yearned for more,—forbidden fruit again !

Mrs. Pelham was concerned for her friend's indisposition, although she felt certain it was nothing of consequence, and her own and her husband's interests were paramount now. So they parted with the hope of renewing their intercourse in town.

Autumn was approaching, and there was "no one in town;" still, Anglo-Indians are not so fastidious as the *habitués* of the smoky city. Mr. Pelham found abundant occupation, and actually a few men he knew about Oriental clubs, and his wife shopping without end in the mysterious process of making herself fit to be seen, before she ran down to see "dear Mamma" and her charming niece.

The Pryors went North; Scotland could only be visited in autumn, and the moors had attractions for him, though he did not shoot. There were people in the country, and it would be pleasant for awhile. Douglas Pryor was to inherit their Highland property, and it was as well to make themselves known to their tenants and neighbours, and accustom the young heir to his future associates. So once more, with a thrill of terror, and yet outwardly as a sort of somnambulist, Edith visited the scenes of her childhood, —the scenes in which the first mortal agony of her life had been endured, an agony the result of her own weakness, intensified by her father's harshness. There was much confusion of feeling when she thought of that dead parent, and tried to mourn him with filial affection; but her one

great grief, which stood out like a mountain, huge and distorted in the midst of her life, and dwarfed the recollections of her previous happiness and more recent prosperity, was his creation. Her enforced though secret dishonour was his work,—her separation from the child, towards whom her heart always yearned, his doing. She tried to forgive him, and *could not*; and she hated herself for her want of religious feeling. She wandered over her old haunts—scenes of her despair and misery—the cave in the rocks in which she had hoped to hide her fugitive husband; it seemed as fresh as if it had all happened a week ago,—and the intervening time a clouded dream. She sat down on the rock which was the view-point of their little domain, and saw once more the loch on the fair bosom of which she used to watch the ever-varying reflections on its glassy surface. There she seemed to see reflected the scenes which in murky London had been to her as Paradise. She saw there in a fitful phantasmagora much that had faded into treacherous sleep for many long years,—a sleep that she had hoped was death. She remembered vividly a morning when Downie was busy writing platonic letters to some elderly admirer;—how she

had been "bitten by the spirit of shopping," and, accompanied by her nurse, had gone to shop in Oxford Street;—how, having given the old woman an hour's work in the selection of blankets, sheetings, and other napery dear to a Scotch heart, she had voted it dull work, and gone to amuse herself in the millinery room, she had said;—how, when nurse had finished her selections, she had gone in search of her, and how they had *missed each other*! She remembered well—too well—who met her at the side-door with a cab, and where they went, and what they did, in that brief hour.

She felt that she could see it all in the bright transparent water; she felt that she could go now and retrace her steps, although she did not know the name of a single locality.

It was too late now!—too late! too late! But why had she not insisted on doing so when the honour of herself and her child was at stake? Why did she not? Because her father's will conquered hers; because he preferred her secret shame to the open slur of suspected murder,—preferred to make her base, to affect to consider her ruined, rather than she should bear *his* name. And now that father was gone, and she was left

to suffer,—left to know that she had been imposed on her husband, and that for all his goodness she dare not tell him the truth!—left to bear the intolerable burden of a secret she dare not disclose. She was a culprit to him, to her children, to the world,—an impostor! She was unworthy to look her sons in the face, more unworthy of fondling her daughter; so at least she felt, when the fits of remorse were on her. She had no self-reliance, no power of acting alone; and since her father's death her principles, which had been crushed and smothered under the yoke of his iron will, were gradually reasserting themselves and regaining their elasticity. Too weak to act decisively, all she could do was to harrow herself with vain regrets; to torture herself with exaggerated pictures of her guilt,—the guilt of which her father had been the cause,—the guilt of tacitly submitting to her own and her daughter's disgrace.

Oh! that she had only borne his name, and openly mourned him before the world! She knew he was no murderer, and she would have been proud of bearing his name before the world—proud of his child; and then she might still have been what she was now, without the burden of a secret.

Then it occurred to her that she should like to see *her*—her Ethel; and she wrote to Mrs. Pelham to ask for cartes of them all. A wild hope seized her, that as that lady was so proud of her niece, that she might include Ethel's among those of her family; but they did not come. Mrs. Pelham said that the man who took them so wonderfully well at the Priory had gone away, and as she was staying with dear Mamma, she must wait until she returned to town again; but, in the meantime, dear Mamma insisted on them paying her a long visit, and staying over Christmas; and if Mr. Pryor found Scotland too cold, as she supposed he would, and they returned south, dear Mamma desired her to request the pleasure of a visit from them. The Priory was charming, and sheltered, and cosy; and dear Mamma was glad of the opportunity of having them with her to entertain their country friends, and to introduce her young niece more fully. Dear Ethel was all she had hoped to find her—tall, and graceful, and handsome, besides being such a dear, good girl! such an unselfish creature, and yet brought up so in the country! Accomplished too—such a voice! In fact, Blanche was one whose pen flew swiftly when enlarging

on what touched herself and her own interests. She was pleased with her niece ; and knowing that the Pryors were rich, she felt that, as Ethel was coming out, they were desirable acquaintances for her. She had a bevy of daughters of her own coming on in the nursery and school-room, and Mr. Pryor's sons were both highly eligible boys, so that, all things considered, it was good policy to cultivate the acquaintance of the gentle, pensive woman, and her eccentric but worthy husband. Sharp and observing as she deemed herself, prone as she was to see things which did not exist except in her own imagination, Blanche never for an instant connected her telegram with her friend's indisposition, or detected what was so very palpable, and before her eyes. Blanche had been at school when "that unfortunate affair" occurred, and the whole thing had been hushed up to her—tabooed in fact ; and what had become of her poor brother's wife had never disturbed her peace. That she had died at the time of Ethel's birth was a pleasing fiction she had created out of the surface of things, as she had seen them, and she had told it so often, that she had grown to believe it as implicitly as if she had been acquainted with all



the facts; for "of course the woman *must* be dead, or dear Mamma would have mentioned her;" so Blanche would have been ready to depose to the time and place of her sister-in-law's funeral rather than admit her own ignorance of the particulars of it. She was one who liked to make the surface of everything smooth, and to offer no rough impediments to their gliding through the world evenly—nothing to bring things up short by some angle which could not be made to pass through a rounded aperture. These unruly angles she always disposed of, although they might contain the most distinguishing features of a case. It was not voluntary or deliberate untruthfulness, but a habit she had given herself in her Indian reign of making everything, as she put it, "work smoothly." It was her hobby to do this; and it was her pet phrase, when these angles *would* cause a hitch occasionally in the movements of her social machinery.

In the long run, her husband found it a very useful and convenient hobby in his position; so he encouraged her to ride it, and a great deal of unpleasantness, and a great many bickerings and heart-burnings and quarrels, were stifled

in the embryo by her skilful management, and her elastic memory as to facts. Still it required more than Blanche's wisdom always to be successful, and she had occasionally come to grief in her diplomatic performances. The habit was there, however; and now she had retired into private life, she felt that there was still field for its exercise in her family affairs.

Robert was to be at home, and she suspected all was not well with him. She might be able to advise him; and there was Gilbert, too, had shown symptoms of a wish to take care of himself; but she might be useful to him, she might advise him. Altogether Blanche felt that she had work before her, and that she was equal to the occasion.

## CHAPTER IX.

## WOOLERTON PRIORY BECOMES HOSPITABLE.

BUT what has become of our wide-awake lover during all this time? Making himself famous in another sphere, and sending occasional harrowing accounts of his hair-breadth escapes to the 'Times,' for Gilbert had joined an Alpine club, and had been ascending Mont Blanc, and descending wonderful crevasses, into which no one had ever ventured before, and otherwise disporting himself after the fashion of his nation, when bent on distinguishing themselves by personal feats and performances, wonderful and incomprehensible to foreign understandings.

But we must go back a little to the time of the Richmond dinner. That was at the end of

the London season, and after the first Woodlandshire Archery Meeting, at which Ethel had appeared to so much advantage.

Very wide-awake indeed did Gilbert feel after that "accidental" communication of Robert's; and very far ahead, indeed, did he determine to look before he took any more decided matrimonial steps. So far, and so earnestly did he "look ahead," that, like many others equally clever, he missed the pearls at his feet, and crushing them under his heels, heedlessly passed them by.

How was he to act?

He determined to leave matters to take their course, and do nothing rash,—to enact the cant of the worldly-wise; and, as he felt "uncomfortably spoony" in Ethel's company, to keep clear of the chance of making a fool of himself. Of her affection for him he felt quite secure; she was his, heart and soul,—he was quite safe there, quite secure in his belief that she would not betray their existing understanding by deed or word; but he could not give her up at once; he must see her now and then, and enjoy her guileless faith in him, and give himself up to the happiness of the moment in her society; but he

must not commit himself, and must never remain long enough to attract the observation of the lynx-eyed Mrs. Grymes or the penetrating solicitude of Nellie.

He felt certain that Mrs. Mildmay watched him and took notes, and he hated to be watched; so he went backwards and forwards after Robert had been on that visit (fruitless as to its chief aim), was very tender to Ethel when alone with her, and treated her alternately as a child, and then with mock deference as a young woman, before her watchful relatives, and admired her confusion and the glances of confidence she gave him the while. Then he became even more affectionate and filial to Lady Agnes, his second mother he said; and when his Uncle and Aunt Pelham had fixed the day for their visit, he posted up to London to see them in town and bid them farewell. He told Ethel he could not stand having them all at once with their eyes never off him.

The charm of their love would be gone if they had to stand Aunt Blanche's scrutiny, and be trotted out for the household to see how they made love to each other. No. Some fellows had been boring him about Switzerland and the

Oberland and that sort of thing ; every fellow had to do it sometime to avoid being bored to do it at all,—so he would make himself scarce for a time and join them. His uncle was an excellent, worthy fellow, but deuced prosy and dogmatic ; talked to him, by Jove, as if he was a native or a schoolboy still ; and his aunt would take the love-making out of his hands and do it all for him herself, if she guessed the state of the case ; so he could not stand being in the same house with them. The charm of the Priory was gone when the sweet seclusion was invaded by strangers.

All these sentiments had come out between the puffs of a cigar, held well to leeward lest the smoke should offend her, for he was trying to impress her with the new idea that it was no longer an offence to a lady to smoke in her presence, and she was breaking herself in to like tobacco for his sake ; so he lolled on the grass at her feet, while she sat on one of the many rustic seats placed in nooks about the grounds.

They had been wandering about thus together since their childhood, and no one heeded them if they were occasionally caught in rather sentimental positions, so composed and at home did

they both seem on these occasions ; but her heart would beat wildly while she was smothering a bitter disappointment all the time. " Oh, if I could only tell Grannie, and not have a secret from her of my own ! " But how could she ask Gilbert to let her do this, when it would be actually asking him to propose for her in form ? It would be a decidedly indelicate proceeding according to her views ; yet Ethel felt that she was old enough now to be engaged openly as well as privately ; and now for him to go abroad was very unkind ; still she sympathized with him to a certain extent.

She was the object in that house as Gilbert was in her Uncle Pelham's family, and it would not be pleasant to be watched. She tried to see things from his point of view, and, although she knew of a pleasanter one which seemed practicable, she gave way with a smile and a tear.

He promised, however, to take care of himself for her sake, and felt very spoony indeed with her, and very angry with her parents for their folly in leaving that *bar* on her, which she must bear, he feared, now for life through the world alone.

Poor thing ! Even if circumstances precluded

his marrying her, he could always be very kind to her and look after her. Gilbert always intended to be and believed himself a "model man," and generosity and liberality were among the virtues he always ascribed to himself, and occasionally practised.

"Yes, poor dear girl," he would say, "I will never lose sight of her, and shall always watch over her, even if the force of circumstances compel me to bestow my charming person on a more fortunate woman. I can never forget the debt of gratitude I owe to her grandmother." And with these indefinite feelings he took his departure, leaving his love to lie fallow for the time, as the safest plan for all parties.

Robert had "dropped down on them" at Woolerton unexpectedly, as he had determined, to catch that fellow face to face and to discover if he had been employed by that she-devil Nellie to copy those pictures and certificates. No one else, he was fully convinced, could have thought of such a diabolical scheme to annoy him; and how she obtained the requisite information still troubled him.

"If the fellow is, as Mrs. Grymes said, an old friend of her husband, he must be a fellow-



conspirator and not a mere tool of hers." But Robert was again doomed to be baffled, for on his arrival Caleb had just gone, and no one knew whither, or would admit they knew, although the picture of the Woodlandshire archery meeting appeared in the 'Illustrated News,' and gained many friends and patrons in the county for him.

Robert called on the Vicar, and became deeply interested in parish affairs, and deplored his mother's inability to do more, on account of her infirmity (and, he omitted to say, of his extravagance).

"Lady Agnes does her part; she is most charitable; and Mrs. Mildmay and Miss Chetwynd are both very active among the poor." And the Vicar only stated a simple fact.

Mrs. Grymes bridled at this.

"They do their best, I am sure, love; but every one has not the gift of being judicious district-visitors. They will not be guided by rules, and they visit irregularly, just when they hear people are ill or want them, instead of at stated times; in fact neither of these ladies will join our club; they seem to prefer their own devices, and it is very much to be regretted,—it clashes with all our system of action."

The Vicar frowned at his wife, but she knew her ground better than he did; she knew that she was gaining access to Robert's *interior*, for heart he had not, by abusing indirectly his relatives.

He mildly vindicated them, however, but *very* mildly indeed. "They mean well, I think, but they are both so engaged with my mother that they can only have irregular opportunities of seeing the poor. Besides, in my mother's position, perhaps, they should visit the poor independently on her behalf."

"Perhaps so; and they are so much taken up with the pursuit of the fine arts. That Mr. Williams seems to have quite fascinated them with his performances. Quite a wonder in a quiet neighbourhood like this to be so constantly visited by so proficient an artist; he must have some strong inducement."

"They are not learning photography, are they? I have heard nothing of it."

"Oh dear, no! but he is often at Mrs. Mildmay's; so much so that, as I mentioned before, people begin to wonder."

Mrs. Grymes at this went to her new oriel window,—a perfect watch-tower in its way.

"Look here, I see him perpetually going in there, and you know how fond of gossiping some people are; but she accounts for his visits by saying that he was a friend of her late husband, and that of course accounts for what in itself would otherwise be peculiar."

And Mrs. Grymes twinkled and tried to look knowing.

"What sort of looking fellow is this man? he always contrives to be absent when I am here. I wanted him to take me, and I offered him a large commission at Chetwynd Park, but he declined it."

"Well, it is hard to describe him; he might have been good-looking once, has still a good nose and mouth, but his right cheek seems to have been cut open from the corner of the eye to the jaw-bone, leaving such an odious scar; and what the other side might have been, no one can tell, on account of his eye,—he has lost it, and so he covers the empty socket with a large shade. He has black hair and beard, and is very swarthy, only he has very blue eyes,—at least, one blue eye; tall, with a sort of limp in his walk, from some sort of lameness. I never see him except in a shabby coat and an old wide-

awake hat, though he must be making money, and more than he admits. Altogether, I have come to the conclusion that the man is something more than he seems,—he excites curiosity, I can tell you.”

“Is he not connected with the ‘Illustrated News?’”

“Very likely. He took such a lovely picture of the Archery Meeting, with Miss Chetwynd and Mr. Pelham in front,—quite sentimental and suggestive, and very like her it was.”

“What club? what meeting? I never heard of it.”

“The Archery Meeting at Lady Dacre’s, at Dacrelands. I heard that Miss Chetwynd was quite the belle there, and of the ball too; and people said that Mr. Pelham was engaged to her,—such a handsome couple as they will make!” And Mrs. Grymes knew that she was worrying Robert, and smiled blandly.

“There is nothing more than bread-and-butter love in that quarter, I suspect; I have heard of nothing more, at least. You know they have grown up together, and a very foolish arrangement it has been, I think.”

Robert was not going to “show his cards to

that woman," but he would never countenance such a rumour for an instant. Let her fall in love with him if she liked, it would keep her out of worse mischief, he thought; but Gilbert should not come forward, if he could prevent him, as a suitor for her hand.

Before leaving the Vicarage, he sauntered down the garden with Mrs. Grymes, and then he took an opportunity of telling her, as if he just remembered it, that the description she had given of the man in question, the photographer, was ominously like that of a very suspicious character of whom he had known something; he left her to imagine *what*, but he advised her to be careful, and to look after him if he came again, but on no account to say anything to any one, or quote him. He would warn his people at the Priory, but "You ladies are hard to manage,—they are so infatuated with their own favourites."

He knew this ambiguous seed would fructify, he had planted it in fruitful soil, so he left, satisfied with the effect of his visit, and in a short time was on his way again to Baden. Dora was still at her *pension* at Munich, and Marion dragging out a vapid existence in various places

of amusement, of which she was heartily tired, and speculating on her husband's spasms and other queer and unaccountable habits in a languid sort of way.

Soon after his departure the Pelhams had arrived in England, and then, as soon as their visit to the Priory was decided upon, Gilbert had gone abroad, much to his regret, he told them, but it was an engagement he could not very well break. Then Blanche, having "made herself fit to be seen," which meant, after spending some hundreds on herself and children in an "outfit," and worrying herself in the hot, deserted streets of London until she was satiated with shopping, went down with the family, *en masse*, to take up a residence with "dear Mamma."

Mr. Pelham meditated paying several visits where he could not take his wife's train with him, including an ayah and one or two native men still, though several others had been sent back to India, so he was glad to have so convenient a haven in which to deposit his retinue.

Blanche had not the most remote idea of settling into any well-regulated English home. She

was almost afraid of an English servant, their manners repelled her after the subservience of Orientals.

Her health had improved in England, that is to say that she was stronger, general debility being her ailment, but she looked like a very faded white lily, the leaves of which had turned to a dead brownish-yellow, such being the colour of her hair. She was an odd compound of personal indolence and mental activity and habits of command. She would lie on the sofa all day, and never stir a limb, except to ring a bell at her side, while she was mentally reforming her mother's home, marrying Ethel to some imaginary lover, and settling her children's future,—planning, scheming, arranging for ever. People called on her from every quarter within twenty miles, out of respect to Lady Agnes, but they did not pay her homage, and she did not like it; she did not like their country manners, she said.

She was charmed with Ethel, however,—so like her dear dead brother! so handsome! so commanding!—sang so beautifully! Really she was quite proud of her, and so pleased at the idea of presenting her next year. “You know,

dear, in virtue of Mr. Pelham's position, it will be imperatively necessary that I should attend Court."

George was always having audiences, etc. etc., and Blanche quite believed she would create quite a sensation by reason of his position when the time came for her to present herself,—at the private *entrée* perhaps! Was she entitled to that distinction?—she would ask George.

And all this time Ethel waited on her and amused her and played with the children. The boys were quickly dispatched at the beginning of the term to a preparatory school at Harrow, Gilbert's old quarters, and then Blanche wrote to her dear Edith and recommended Harrow for her sons too (it was so advantageous for Wilbraham and Giles to cultivate those young Pryors), and then dear Mamma was talked to and interested in behalf of her sweet friend, and then the invitation was sent to the Pryors to spend a week or two at the Priory and become acquainted with Lady Agnes.

Mr. Pryor at once said that they must accept it. He liked Mr. Pelham; his Indian associations were more congenial to him than the habits of the country gentlemen in his own county; Scot-



land was too cold, and he utterly abhorred London, so Edith was spared the trial of deciding for herself. How she longed for, and yet dreaded, the visit !

Lady Agnes was blind, and therefore could not recognize her ; none of the others had ever seen her, and she would see Ethel, be under the same roof with her, talk to her ! Oh ! if she could only hope to keep up through it all ! Yet, had she not supported herself under worse trials for long, long years ? Why should she fail now, when she knew what was likely to happen and could prepare herself for it ? It would only be a little more imposture, a little more dissembling, added to the past.

Edith was beginning to look worn and ill, and Mr. Pryor insisted on it that the climate did not suit her. Instead of roses blooming on her cheeks, she was looking thin and ill and pale ; and then he petted her, and redoubled his attentions to her, and she hated herself the more for deceiving him.

Edith became morbidly miserable and unhappy, (yet longed for the visit and to see that girl), pined for the hour she still dreaded until she became really ill, feverish, nervous, excited.

Then her husband decided to take her to London and consult a physician, and the physician ordered her out of town again immediately ; so by dint of a little more correspondence, and a run up to town, which Blanche roused herself to take, the preliminaries were arranged, and Edith was to go to the Priory to pay a quiet visit with her friend, while Mr. Pryor and Mr. Pelham made it their headquarters, and went about *en garçon* together or alone, as best suited them.

Edith supplied a certain want in Blanche's life, for neither her mother nor her niece were sufficiently docile to suit her habits, and her placid friend was just the person she could advise and direct, and who would cling the more to her for doing so, and look up to her and value what did not seem to be sufficiently appreciated either by her mother or niece.

The dear old lady could scarcely realize to herself the change in her home which this inroad of Indians and strangers had effected ; yet, on the whole, she enjoyed that change now it had been accomplished. Blanche, with all her faults, was a more satisfactory child to her than Robert ; she was glad to talk to her, hour after hour, and hear descriptions of their Indian court, rather fervidly

coloured, but, on the whole, graphic and amusing. It was new life to Ethel, notwithstanding her heart was with the Alpine wanderer, and altogether they were so welcome, and made to feel so thoroughly valued for their company, that of the whole family none seemed otherwise than happy and glad to be there.

## CHAPTER X.

## THE PICTURE AGAIN.

IN this way it all came about that late in the year Mr., Mrs., and Miss Pryor, with their personal attendants, arrived at the Priory to accept the hospitality of Lady Agnes, and to renew their friendship with Mr. and Mrs. Pelham. Mrs. Pelham's daughters had, in the meantime, been sent to a select and expensive "home" for young ladies at Brighton, there to acquire those adventitious accomplishments which their mother deemed indispensable, and which with their Indian training they were not likely to acquire in the country; another reason for her sending them away was that, as she had made up her mind to winter with her mother, her husband insisted on their reducing their retinue, and sending off the natives,

and as Blanche could not assemble around her the staff she deemed requisite for the efficient education and attendance of her daughters, a "home" for them was the easiest solution of the question, and left her mind free to exercise itself on schemes for the benefit of her friends. She was therefore quite at leisure to take her dear Edith's in hand, when she announced herself as ready to accept her invitation.

Edith Pryor knew well the ordeal before her, and was steeling herself to be calm, but she was quite willing to avail herself of her indisposition to account for any nervous excitement she might be unable to conceal.

The party arrived at an hour most favourable to such a meeting for her: it was dusk, when firelight is sufficient for ordinary purposes, and before lights are brought in. Notwithstanding all the furs and wraps with which her fond husband overwhelmed her, the poor lady was pale and cold and trembling, when she was folded in the arms of her gushing friend as soon as she alighted from her carriage. Blanche had gone out to meet her in the vestibule, and to lead her in to dear "Mamma."

"My dearest creature, how cold you are, and

how wretchedly ill you look ! Come in, dear," and she was swept in, a passive moving bundle of wraps, with Blanche's arm around her waist, into that most cheerful apartment in the house, Lady Agnes's morning-room.

"Dear Mamma, here are our friends at last. Mr. Pryor, Mrs. Pryor, and dear little Mousie !—Miss Pryor, I must say, I suppose. Do come near the fire and warm yourselves ; and, dear me ! I had almost forgotten her ! My niece, Miss Chetwynd ; Mrs. Pryor, Mr. and Miss Pryor," etc. etc.

"Ethel dear, come and help me with these wraps, they will keep out the heat indoors. Now you must just let us put you comfortably on that sofa, and not let you stir to go to your room until you are thoroughly warm. George is out hunting, Mr. Pryor ; he had started before your letter came, but, with the permission of the fox, he will be home in a very short time now ; he never stays out late in this damp weather."

Blanche was in her element, her own ailments forgotten while she fussed over her friend ; but Edith heeded her not ; she was simply passive under her attentions, while her eyes were riveted on Ethel as she gently came forward at her

aunt's summons, and, after taking her cloak and bonnet and settling some cushions under her head, floated off out of the room.

The girl had said very little, but she could not help showing her concern in her expressive countenance. The delicate, almost fainting woman enlisted her sympathies, and Ethel was ready to do almost anything to make her comfortable,—the sigh of regret which Edith unconsciously gave as she disappeared was scarcely emitted, however, when she returned with a cup of hot tea in her hand.

"I knew it was in preparation somewhere, and I thought I could get it quicker by going myself than by ringing. Perhaps this will warm you a little, Mrs. Pryor," and she offered the refreshing beverage to the stranger, while her aunt continued to fuss and to ask first Mr. Pryor and then dear Edith how she contrived to get ill, and wondered at the origin of her delicacy. Then she elicited Mr. Pryor's wonder too, and his doubts about climate, agreeing with her and all the doctors said about nerves and the obscure causes of disease, etc. etc.

The timid hand trembled visibly as she took the cup from Ethel and looked up into the kindly-

beaming face which was hanging over her. It was inexpressibly sweet to her to be thus attended, to take that first cup from her hand even while her ears were assailed by the discussion going on in which, both literally and metaphorically, her nerves were torn to shreds by her husband and friend. She said little, but she feasted her eyes on her daughter, drank her tea—the most delicious she had ever tasted, she thought—and tried only to take in the happier side of the picture.

There sat Lady Agnes opposite to her, trying to get in a word to Mr. Pryor now and then through Blanche's chatter—she whose motherly voice supported her long ago in the hour of her terrible suffering, she whose presence sustained her good name when questions might have been asked about her. There she sat, faded and blind now, yet with the same courtly presence; and there stood, in the first full beauty of her womanhood, the little baby whose wailing cry, when she was placed in her arms in that terrible hour, used to haunt her for years afterwards. Space and time seemed annihilated since it all happened in that far-away secluded Norman town in which Ethel first saw the light. Then she thought of



her husband and of her children. Could it all be true, or was she dreaming?—was the scene before her real or not?—what was true, and what would happen next? They thought she was dozing, and left her to herself for a while, and then it became time to prepare for dinner, and Blanche renewed her attentions.

Ethel had appropriated Mousie and had been regaling her with tea and cake, and the latter young lady (another Edith) was quite at home already.

“My dear Mrs. Pryor,” said the old lady as the younger one rose to go upstairs, “I must commend you to the care of my granddaughter, who does the honours of my house for me here. You know my infirmity, and will therefore excuse me. Ethel is my right hand and my representative in this house, and I leave her to look after her aunt and uncle too, and take care of them.”

She had never framed the idea in words, but she had an instinctive recognition of the fact that her daughter would be glad to supersede Ethel and take the reins herself, and in the line which she had quietly determined to keep, of supporting Ethel always as the second only to herself in that establishment, she never allowed an op-

portunity to pass without asserting the fact. Her daughter and her family were very welcome and dear to her, but they were guests only in that house.

Mrs. Pryor, then, had a very good excuse for taking Ethel's arm and following her husband and daughter to their apartments; nor could Blanche well complain, her own delicacy being considered.

There is something very charming in the acts of hospitality performed by a fresh young girl new to, and proud of the office, but there was a warmth and genuine kindness in Ethel's manner which went home at once to the poor mother's heart.

Of course Blanche came with them and never for once entrusted her dear friend to that raw, inexperienced child. She fussed about the room, made a tremendous commotion, overpowered the gentle Italian maid, and at length went off to dress for dinner. It all ended in Mrs. Pryor's feeling too fatigued to go down. Ethel had suggested the idea, feeling how weak she seemed as she led her up, and she was glad to seize upon it and adopt it. The fatigue of her journey, her head, the usual hackneyed excuses for a heart

strained beyond its power of self-support. Edith felt that she must be alone to recover herself, or that she must break down; she could not brave the light yet. Quiet and rest were all she required, she told her husband; and he, good, kind man, made the most elaborate apologies for her when he joined the party in the drawing-room, to which Mr. Pelham had been added, and Nellie also.

Alone, and certain of being left alone for a time—for she said she wanted sleep, and dismissed her maid—Edith's pent-up emotions found vent; passionate floods of tears came to her relief—tears of neither joy nor woe, but complex in their origin—served to calm and steady her.

Thank God! the trial of that meeting was over, it was a thing to look back upon, and she had not betrayed herself; she could see and speak to Ethel,—even grow into her affections, if she tried. Surely all this was something to make her very thankful to God for His mercy to her. Her child had all that love and wealth could give her, all that she need do now would be to keep her own counsel. She thought of her early aptitude for dissimulation, and shuddered; then it was a

sin,—now it was an imperative necessity, and yet it seemed so much harder to practise it! Yet if she were ever to betray herself, where could it be with less risk than under the roof of her best and bravest friend, the one surviving witness of the truth. There was no fresh feature now, worse than what had been there from the beginning,—what she had lived through and survived,—only a wild, dangerous happiness to conceal, in place of the dead, leaden weight of years. She looked at herself in the glass with some solicitude. A year or two less than forty, she might have been still called pretty: the eyes were there still, though their long, deep fringes were somewhat reduced. Would any one see a likeness? No! she thought not, nothing, at least, that could attract attention. Ethel was a Wilbraham in every particular, except some accidental traits which were evidently her own. Could she win on her love for herself only, without betraying her natural claim to it? Perhaps so. “I may win her pity and sympathy for my bodily infirmities,—I don’t think I shall repel her,” and Edith cast another wistful glance at her mirror, and saw there that pensive, mournful face which, in the midst of commanding wealth and position, seldom won more for her than

involuntary sympathy and *pity* ; pity for something too evident there, but the origin of which was not to be discovered in her envied *entourage*. When her watch told her that she might anticipate another inroad, she bathed her eyes, adjusted her dress to a becoming *déshabillé* with the help of a costly shawl, and joined the party, or rather anticipated them in the drawing-room. It was less boring than to have husband, child, friend, and a maid or two perpetually asking her how she felt now. She told them below that a nice sleep had refreshed her, so she sat near the old, tried friend of that dark and miserable interlude of her life, and renewed her acquaintance with her as a perfect stranger, indulging in a slightly foreign accent now and then, lest her voice might be recognized, and only gave a furtive glance at Ethel, who was called upon, as usual, to sing, and who soon enlisted Mr. Pryor among her admirers.

Day after day passed now, the usual routine of their quiet life enlivened only by such country amusements as the neighbourhood offered. Edith had become used to it all ; she had learned to feast her eyes on Ethel, and distinguish her by a certain attention and make it seem only as the

courtesy due to a young hostess. She had acquired more confidence in her power of treating Charlie's mother, the friend in need,—the woman who stood foremost among her own sex in her respect and gratitude, was a perfect stranger, but with the courteous respect due to her as her hostess; but it was a hard *rôle* to sustain, for as each day added to her admiration and esteem, each day made it more difficult for her to avoid throwing herself at her knees and confessing all. She belonged, however, especially to Blanche, and that active-minded lady was not likely to resign her claim to her friend's especial companionship, and in Blanche's rooms, therefore, she passed much time, and had to admire Blanche's new outfit of bonnets, dresses, and *lingerie*, two-thirds of which would be out of fashion before she could display them. Blanche, too, hearing that gentle exercise was prescribed for the invalid, bestirred herself to walk also, and occasionally accomplished a turn or two in the grounds with her; but unless they all accompanied the old lady in her carriage for an airing, Blanche much preferred a *tête-à-tête* in her own ponyphaeton, showing her friend the scenery around, and leaving Ethel to captivate "Mousie," a sweet

child of ten, when they generally found their way to the Cottage.

Nellie, too, was much at the Priory, and on very friendly terms with Mrs. Pryor, and, in fact, as Blanche said, actually fastened herself on *her guest*, which was a rather unusual course for Nellie; but she certainly did put herself a little out of her usual way to cultivate the acquaintance of Mrs. Pelham's guest, whatever her motive might have been, and as she succeeded in her effort to win her, the *ci-devant* Indian potentate was not quite pleased, though too proud to own her jealousy of "that poor thing," as she called Nellie, in her amiable way.

Then ensued a course of grand, stately dinners, —dinners *à la Russe*, upon which some Oriental improvements were engrafted by Blanche; dinners which, given in that hitherto quiet household, took the county by surprise; but on the whole Blanche's efforts here were successful. The county approved of the *ci-devant* Eastern ruler and his wife, ate their new-fangled repasts, but most of all appreciated that rising star, the daughter of the house,—the future mistress of the mansion.

Somehow on these occasions both the invalids

forgot their ailments, and dressed and talked like other people while company was in the house, and therefore there was not the same necessity for Ethel to attend on Mrs. Pryor; she left her to Aunt Blanche, warned by a significant hint in the shape of a remark on Nellie, and by her aunt's pointed appropriation of the interesting visitor. This was not a satisfactory arrangement for Edith, but she dared not make further advances to the girl, so she had to content herself by admiring her afar off, and treasuring her love yet more fondly in her heart. On these festal occasions Guy Dacre improved his acquaintance with Ethel, and Nellie saw his *empressement* first with delight, and then with regret when she observed how little he was appreciated by her. She was neither shy nor repulsive; she was simply calm and indifferent, a more hopeless reception of love than any she could have offered him, and the sensitive young man would draw off as if he dared not trust himself in a hopeless effort; then when they met again, he would renew his homage, to which Ethel seemed blind and insensible. All the ladies concluded this to be very unnatural in so young a girl towards her first admirer; but each kept her opinion to herself for different reasons.



After this, the gentlemen having gone through a certain number of dinners, and through the form of a certain quantity of shooting, and Mr. Pelham of hunting, and Mr. Pryor finding his wife's health wonderfully recruited, and that the climate of Woodlandshire was exactly the thing for her, went off on his tour of visits in his own county, taking Mr. Pelham with him, and the ladies were left to themselves for a time.

Then Blanche collapsed and got weak again, and took to her sofa; and as Mrs. Pryor was ordered exercise in the open air, it fell to Ethel's lot to walk with her, and take her beyond the precincts of the Park, and out on the hills behind them, and to visit her favourite cottages.

Edith was wonderfully better now, and never seemed fatigued in Ethel's company, and used now and then to drop in on Mrs. Mildmay, and take a cup of her early tea.

On one of these occasions she was very much struck with a series of views on the walls, photographs of the scenes which Ethel had taken her to admire.

"They are all done by our artist, and you have no idea what a wonderful genius he has,—such taste and judgment in his selections! but he only

comes now and then to take scenes for the 'Illustrated News,' or studies for artists. I believe he has taken me fifty times, more or less, you know."

"What is his name, and where does he live? We might give him something to do in Lincolnshire in the season."

"His name is Caleb Williams." And then the recollection of their secret understanding came over her, and Ethel blushed violently, which blush was not lost on Edith. It gave her a pang. Such blushes should not be summoned to Ethel's cheek by the mention of a travelling artist. She could not manoeuvre; she simply turned to Nellie, and asked—

"Is Mr. Williams old or young?"

"Neither; he is quite *passé*, however, and, poor fellow, he is very much mutilated and disfigured, so much so that few would recognize him again who knew him before. I met him years ago, and the fact of his having once saved Ethel from drowning has of course made him a friend among us all; we never can, I am sure, forget the day when he brought her out of the river, and quite insensible to this house." Ethel quickly turned the conversation.

"When we go home I must show you such a

beautiful picture he did for me, painted in oils—and—”

But Ethel's attention was attracted towards a door which was ajar, and from whence smothered sounds were escaping. Nellie heard them too, and she rose abruptly to investigate the cause of the noise, so did Ethel, but a look from Nellie sent her back to her seat. She knew that the door led into a small slip or passage which had once been an entrance-hall, but which was now used as a sort of store-room, from which was another door into the hall.

“A cat, I suppose,” said Ellen, as she went in; but she shut the door behind her, fussed about a little, as they could hear, opened and shut the outer doors, and then returned to them through the hall, looking, as Ethel was surprised to see, rather queer and agitated. She talked volubly and incoherently about cats, balanced the advantages and disadvantages of having them about a house, and then wandered off to dogs and their habits and tricks. Ethel never knew Nellie so odd, but she did her best, of course, to cover her embarrassment, while Mrs. Pryor came to the conclusion that the sounds were human, perhaps proceeding from some humble visitor in

distress. She was not imaginative; listening servants were unpleasant; but their conversation was very harmless, and the thing was very soon forgotten.

On their return they found Blanche in the drawing-room, lying on the sofa, and entertaining her mother with her reminiscences of Indian life. She looked just like a drooping, faded lily, the leaves of which were turning to a pale greyish-yellow. She was talking languidly with an evident effort at "amusing dear Mamma;" telling her of the almost regal state in which they had been obliged to live in India; of the stupendous mountains which surrounded Simla; how the white houses scattered among the green foliage looked like a shower of sugar-almonds on the hill-sides, and how flat and dwarfed everything seemed in England, etc.

The two pedestrians did not disturb them.

"Do come in now, and see my pictures, Mrs. Pryor. I want you to tell me which you like best before I tell you who and what they are."

And Ethel stirred the fire in her room, and then went over to draw up the blinds, so that her treasures might appear to advantage. A few seconds only elapsed as she made these last arrangements,

and then turned to enjoy the effect; but Mrs. Pryor was "gone," at least she thought so, as she could not see her at first. Where was she?

"Where have you vanished?" asked Ethel; but the next moment, to her dismay, she discovered her guest prone on the rug before the fire, over the mantelpiece of which hung the picture of Charles Chetwynd,—pale, all but insensible, yet clinging with desperate pertinacity to consciousness.

"Oh, Mrs. Pryor, what is the matter?" and with a natural impulse, Ethel's hand was extended to the bell to call for assistance.

"Stop! stop! For Heaven's sake don't call any one! Ethel, my child, stop!" and Ethel knelt by her side as pale as she was, and knew not what to think.

"Ethel, you are a true-hearted girl; I am sure you will not betray me—you will not breathe what has happened to mortal."

"I don't really know what has happened, dear Mrs. Pryor, but I will do what you wish, if you will tell me."—"Another secret to keep from Grannie!" thought Ethel; "I wish to goodness people would not be for ever betraying themselves before me, and burdening me with their

mysteries!" but another look at that appealing face softened her heart again,—

"Oh, Ethel! it's so-like! so like that, it seems as if he had come back from the dead to upbraid me."

"Did you ever know my father, then?"

"Know him! Too well, my child, for him, for you, for all of us! But as you value your peace and my happiness, my *life*, don't breathe a syllable of what I have just betrayed; you won't, my darling! Swear to me that you won't!"

"I will promise so far, but I ought to have no secrets from my grandmother, and perhaps it is something she ought to know."

"Oh, no, no! a thousand times no! It would *kill* me, Ethel; and you would be the last to do that, if you knew all. If she must know, I would tell her myself, and she would be merciful as she was once before; but it can do no good, Ethel, to any living creature, and it would *kill* me, I tell you."

Her wild, imploring eyes distressed Ethel, and she could only soothe the poor woman, whom she firmly believed was raving.

"Let me help you up. Just lie down on the sofa, and don't fret; you may depend on my not injuring or betraying you in any way, dear Mrs. Pryor."

She got up then, with Ethel's help, and lay down on the sofa, her head in Ethel's favourite nook, where she could see *it*,—that picture which had affected her so powerfully, her eyes seemed magnetized towards it—though she allowed Ethel, who was scarcely less agitated than herself, to bathe her temples with eau-de-Cologne, and to divest her of her cloak and furs.

“Ethel, the one secret of my most unhappy life is in your keeping now; it ought to have gone to the grave with me!”

“Oh, don't say so, Mrs. Pryor, *please* don't! I don't know your secret, and please don't tell me about it. I really do wish to be faithful and true to every one, but it is a dreadful burden to know what one ought not to speak of. I cannot betray you now, as I don't know it—and that must be a comfort to you. It is easy to forget this little agitation; after your walk you are just tired and hysterical, like Aunt Blanche is sometimes.”

“Ethel, lock the door and come here; no one must come in until this is over.”

Most unwillingly Ethel obeyed. She had heard of mild lunatics. This might be a case of mental derangement coming to a climax; but the girl was no coward. She obeyed, and then returned

and sat by her side, and tried to soothe her once more. She put her arms round her tenderly, and begged her to cry,—her own tears were flowing fast from sympathy, and she hoped they might relieve the sufferer too; but she was quite unprepared for the passionate embrace which she received in return.

“Ethel! Ethel! you don’t know what this hour is to me. My child, my darling! Charlie’s child too!” (Simple raving, thought Ethel, but if it pacifies her, let it be.)

“Did you know my father well?”

“I always love those who used to know him, and Grannie would be so fond of you too if she knew it.”

“Ethel, swear to me that you will never couple your father’s name with mine!” and she sat up erect again. “If you were to know all, you would see that silence is best.”

“I have promised, and you may rely on me not to mention what I do know, but don’t tell me any more, at least, except one thing. Did you know my mother too? She died when I was born, you know, and I have no picture of her; nor do they ever speak much of her to me; I fancy, Grannie did not know much of her.”



“ Yes, Ethel, I knew her as well as I knew your father. She was a weak woman, and did not act with the strength of mind required in the circumstances. ‘ Speak no ill of the dead,’ is a good motto, and perhaps your grandmother does not like to blame her to you. It is all a family secret, Ethel, and to tell you a portion would perhaps betray all, and it would be *destruction to me*. You will not ruin my life by betraying a temporary weakness? It might lead to questions, and then all would come out, and I should die. Don’t kill me, Ethel!” And she looked with streaming eyes now at the picture, and strained Ethel more convulsively to her heart.

Though believing half of it to be the effect of overstrained nervousness, Ethel was from sympathy almost as excited and agitated as Edith. The tie of friendship for her parents was quite enough to bind her to her new friend more closely than to any one she knew beyond the range of her relations ; so she gently returned the caresses, hoping still to calm her.

“ Ethel,” she continued, “ there are passages in my life recorded in God’s book, of which I shall not fear to give an account to Him, when my time comes ; but the same passages revealed

to man now, when too late, would bring unavailing sorrow and grief to many. *I should die under it.* The dread of it is killing me fast enough, though by slow degrees. I was weak and foolish, and afraid to speak the truth at the right time, and now it is too late! too late! too late! The grave has closed over all, and you are the only living witness of the past."

"Don't say that of me, I implore you; don't put such a fearful responsibility on me."

"You are born to it! It is your inheritance; you cannot divest yourself of it if you tried, I tell you! Only hold your tongue, and conquer your blushes, and command your eyes, my dear girl. It is a passive duty you have to perform."

Ethel let her rave on—for simple raving she now believed it to be—but she did not pity her the less; she knew what would ensue if Blanche saw any symptoms of a mystery, and then she thought of the adverse fate which seemed to be perpetually burdening her with other people's affairs. "Another secret, and two out of the three great ones I have to keep, are about my father! What could he have done that all who knew him loved him, and yet that there should be something no one can talk about! A family secret

she calls it! It is what God has put in my path, and therefore it is His will that I should perform the task He gives me faithfully. We cannot choose our work, and therefore I must be faithful in this. And I WILL be faithful to this poor, afflicted lady, my father's friend," and as she thought this, she smoothed her hair and kissed her once more.

But steps were now heard in the passage, and some one knocked.

"Come in," said Ethel, unused to locking out. But Blanche only rattled impatiently.

Then Ethel, with a flushed face and a guilty conscience, had to rise and unlock the door, and make some ambiguous remarks about the lock's *catching*. For herself she would not have done this, but she knew that to be locked in with her aunt's guest was an infringement on that aunt's privileges which would be resented. How she loathed the necessity for such petty evasions! Edith, better trained, was sitting up, and with her face well in the shade when her friend came in.

"Upon my word, you two are comfortable, and enjoying yourselves! I am quite jealous! It is bad enough to be a wretched invalid, confined

to the house, while you can walk. You need not appropriate Mrs. Pryor from me and decoy her into your *sanctum*, you puss ; we were wondering what had become of you both."

"It is Mrs. Pryor's first offence ; she came in here to see my rooms and my pictures and other pretty things, and—there was a good fire, so you see here we remained, as she was a little tired."

"Oh, yes ; is not this a luxurious chamber for that spoilt child ! Such pretty things as she has about her ! And what do you think of that picture of my poor dear brother, Ethel's father, you know ? It is so like him, and he was one of the handsomest men I ever saw ; but, poor fellow, he married too young some lovely creature—Ethel's mother, you know—quite a romance it was, although I was a tiny child at the time, and forget almost—but she died at Ethel's birth, and he was drowned soon after, going to join his regiment in Canada. I was only a wee thing at the time, but dear Mamma suffered dreadfully, and now that dear saucy puss has cut us all out with her. I really believe she loves Ethel better than she does me,—but *I* am not jealous," and she threw her arms round Ethel, and kissed her. "Why, I have made you cry, love ! I did not mean it, for

I hate scenes and tears and all such things. Come, Mrs. Pryor, let us leave the poor thing to recover herself."

But Mrs. Pryor was herself silently weeping, too.

"You forget, Blanche dear, I am very weak and nervous, and very little makes me quite hysterical."

"How stupid of me not to remember! I never would have alluded to poor dear Charlie if I had thought of it. It is so foolish to be raking up old sorrows, or creating artificial ones; come, or I must scold you."

So Edith made her way to her room, under Blanche's wing, and came down calm and composed to dinner, and if Aunt Blanche thought Ethel looked unusually pale and ill, she blamed herself for exciting her, and made a note that the girl wanted firmness and self-control, and meditated on the best course to pursue in improving her "tone." Nothing prematurely wore out a girl's good looks so effectually as giving way to a morbid sentimentality. "So silly to be crying over a father's picture, which was before her eyes every day in the year, and the original of which she never saw, too!" Well, it was lucky

that neither Guy Dacre nor any other eligible was present to see how she fell off when she was in the dolefuls. Ethel sang, however, as usual that evening for her grandmother; and although Blanche, by way of encouragement, told her she was out of voice, neither she nor any one else could have imagined that another great and mysterious wave had just swept over that young creature's inward history,—washing away old impressions, and leaving new and undefined ones, traced in mysterious characters, which as yet she could not understand. She had thought Mrs. Pryor slightly deranged at the time; but now, as she saw that calm placid woman, whose sweet pathetic voice enlisted every one's interest, softly conversing with her grandmother and aunt, or drinking in the music of her own melody with wrapt attention, she could not indulge in such a suspicion. She had begged her not to tell her,—she was glad not to know what might compromise any one, yet it was plain to her that there was some painful history of which her father was the hero, and in which others were implicated and in danger. Then Caleb's mystery occurred to her. Could they, that soft, refined, luxurious woman, and the battered world-worn

man know each other, or be in any way connected with each other in the romance of her father's life? Most likely this lady might have been in love with her father, and he might have preferred her own mother to her, and she might have in some way resented it, and injured them, and now she repented,—and then Caleb's story. That was plainly some other matter, she would not even *wonder*, it was not quite honourable to either.

## CHAPTER XI.

IN AMBUSH.—SOMETHING LIKE A CAT.—CAUGHT  
IN THE ACT.

THE photographer, as we know, had been absent since the time of the archery meeting. The landlord of the 'Plough,' a rural 'pub,' second only to the 'Mitre' in respectability, but less subject to the inroads of genteel company, and therefore more convenient and reasonable for Caleb, had been frequently questioned about his lodger. Some wanted to employ him; some asked out of curiosity, others from malevolence. That confidential communication made by Robert to Mrs. Grymes, like leaven had leavened the whole parish; his innuendoes had spread through the whole village, from one to another, until every one had heard that Mr. Williams, who



seemed so harmless and innocent, was a criminal of some sort, and that "some one" was on the look-out for him. Others had come to know, how they could not tell, that Mrs. Mildmay was forgetting what was due to her high connections, and encouraging "that man."

All this had been discussed in the bar of the 'Plough' from time to time, but the landlord, old Kemp, "knew the world," he said; and he "knew a gen'lman from the other thing. He should know Mr. Williams by now, *he* should think, after him a coming and a going for the matter of four year or more. A harmlesser, more steadier gen'lman never stept nor he." So, after some months' absence, when Caleb made his appearance late one night, having walked from the station, the worthy host took the opportunity of telling him these rumours, and warning him, if it was not "all square" with him, to "hook it out of that," so as not to let them have the satisfaction of taking him.

"My good fellow, no one can have anything to say against me with truth. They can say what they please—and *lie*; but their tongues cannot injure me much, except in my business. I only came over here to settle an account not far off,

and, as you see, have not brought my apparatus with me ; if I had, I should stay and brave them all. But I am obliged to be off again directly, so don't say I am here."

The good man put his finger to his nose, by way of signifying acquiescence, and left him.

The next day Caleb was off early, as if going across country, but he soon doubled back towards the Priory, and plunged into the woods. Among the tangled brushwood, and more trim, but still closely-planted shrubberies, there was plenty of room for concealment; at this season there was not much going on in the grounds, and among the evergreens there was close cover. At one point there was that little knoll which, forming a promontory round which the river swept, left still a tiny pass between it and the water along which the walk from the Priory to the Cottage led. This knoll, as we may remember, was steep and bold, finely covered with laurels, and commanded a perfect bird's-eye view of the Priory and its grounds on the left, while on the right the bridge and Cottage were seen through the trees. The path was the only communication between the two houses, except by the carriage-drive over the bridge, which made a considerable *détour*.

Among the evergreens Caleb took his seat. There was a stump of an old tree left there for the purpose, the colour of which was nearly the same as that of his clothes. He refreshed himself from his sandwich-case and flask, and then turned his eye towards the house with no fixed purpose, except, perhaps, the chance of seeing some of its inmates come out of it. He had sat some time, and had begun to feel, even in that sheltered spot, that an *al fresco* repast was rather cold work in November, when his attention was attracted by the figures of two ladies who emerged from a side-door, pottered aimlessly about among the now bare flower-beds, and then, after standing still to consult, started off in the direction in which he was concealed. Caleb always carried a powerful glass; he had been using it all the morning; but when they came near him, he seemed to lack the power of holding it. He lay now flat on the damp earth, and with his arms crossed before him, rested his chin on them, and fixed his eyes on the walk below.

The two ladies, who were Mrs. Pryor and Ethel, approached leisurely, and talking all the time with conventional politeness to each other, yet with a degree of intimacy and sympathy of

feeling beyond common politeness. Each had cultivated and refined tastes. The one a home-bred, high-souled, strong-charactered country girl; the other a pliant, yielding, weak, though travelled woman of mature years; their opportunities seemed to have balanced their gifts.

“I have such a lovely view taken from this spot by our artist.” And they stopped to look back immediately under where he lay. “Our artist is a genius, I can tell you.” Then Edith made some observations on the river, and the peculiar hue of the water,—pointing to particular spots where the reflections were strongest; and then they stood silently gazing on, and enjoying the scene.

“If we are to make our visit to Nellie, and earn our tea, we must hurry on.” These were the last words he overheard; they quickened their pace, and were soon lost among the bare trees and evergreens which protected the path.

When they were gone, Caleb rose to his knees. A something almost sublime seemed to have come over that mutilated countenance, as he raised his hands to heaven, and passionately poured forth an incoherent prayer,—inaudible, even if human ears had been near enough to hear him; but still

the prayer which, we are told, does reach the divine ear,—a casting of all his troubles and dangers, seen and unseen, before the throne of grace; a passionate invocation of grace and protection for some one, and of forgiveness for himself. Then he got up, and followed them at a distance.

He soon found his way into Nellie's back garden, and thence to the kitchen.

"Law, Mr. Williams! You do frighten a body."

"Are there visitors in the drawing-room, Mary?"

"Yes, Sir; Miss Ethel and a stranger, Sir."

"Then, Mary, don't say I am here until they are gone. I suppose I can wait in the dining-room?"

"Oh, certainly, Sir. Oh, Sir, she is such a nice lady, the one as come with Miss Ethel! You should get the taking of her picture! Such a shawl as you never seen, from the Injies, Sir! But the big house is full of company these times, Sir; and there's plenty of people a wanting you, Sir. I think you could get as much as you could do now, Sir, if you have a mind to stop."

"I've other fish to fry, elsewhere, Mary, and can't afford to stop at Woolerton in winter. I

have no box with me either, and I only came on a little business, so when I heard that the big house was full, I thought I would pay my duty to Mrs. Mildmay instead of going up there. I will sit here, in the dining-room, until the company is gone. Hush !”

But Caleb did not sit there. He found a door ajar into the old hall, now a store-room, and into this room he penetrated, and there deliberately became an eavesdropper, and that too without any conscientious scruples on the subject.

He peeped through the chinks of the door and saw that sweet, sad face which had haunted him for years. He restrained himself by a powerful effort until the conversation turned upon himself, until those two discussed his merits, as a stranger and an inferior, then he could stand it no longer. Down on the floor he crouched, and sobbed—those dreadful sobs which are so much more touching when wrung from the strong heart of a man, than when a woman from lighter causes thus gives vent to her sorrow,—forgetful that he might be heard in the next room, forgetful of all and everything except the overwhelming fact that it was *her* ; that she was to go home and be

expected to admire that picture, his gift to Ethel a few years before.

Crouched down against the door Ellen found him to her great surprise and dismay, and there she left him after an imaginary raid against an unoffending and visionary cat !

No wonder Ethel thought she looked "queer" on her return, for she narrowly escaped falling over him when she went in, attracted by his sobs, and if she had done so, the others would have followed to the rescue. She contrived, however, to shut him in, return his shade, which he had dropped, and after locking the outer door to secure him from intrusion, return to her visitors.

When they had taken their departure she returned to her prisoner.

She found him still crouched down, and with his face buried in his hands. Gently, very gently, Nellie put hers on his shoulder, and said, "Caleb! My poor Caleb! What brings you here? What is the use of this?"

"Nellie! Nellie! I saw her come here. I was up in the laurel copse. I heard her talking to Ethel, and I could not resist the temptation. I followed them here. I could not keep away. Oh God, give me strength to bear it all, and suffer

in silence for their sakes ! To endure seeing her and hearing her voice talking to *Ethel*, Nellie, and seeming not to know it ! To be obliged to hide like a felon from all who ever knew me—all but you, my best friend ! Oh, it is too much for me !”

“Is it not a blessing though, to see them all well and happy, with all this world can give them ; surely you must be thankful for some of it !”

“Thankful to see her William Pryor’s wife, walking and talking with *Ethel* ! Thankful to know that if I were to appear among them in my true character, I should drop as a bombshell among those dearest to me, and shed nothing but misery and woe ! Thankful that the only service I can render them is to be what I seem to them all, *dead* ! Oh, Nellie ! I fall far short of your standard of Christianity to see comfort in such things to me. I can pray for fortitude to bear the cross laid on me, the effect of my own folly, I can bear it all in secret for their sakes. I can try to endure, and that is all. Is she happy ? Never tell me that, for I cannot believe it. She carries that in her heart, and she shows it in her countenance, which she never can forget in



this world. It has worn those deep furrows in her face, and given that mournful tone to her voice, but if she knew all she would die! It would kill her, Nellie, to see me alive; think what that feeling must be to me! And yet, I have rashly risked this to look on her once more, and see—Mrs. Pryor!”

Ellen sat and wept unrestrainedly. She could say little to comfort him, and the kindest thing she could do was to let him talk on, and thus give vent to his sorrow, while he could see her silent tearful sympathy, and take such comfort from it as he could.

He walked up and down her tiny drawing-room, as was his usual custom when excited, whilst in the midst of all a knock was heard, and almost before he had time to adjust his shade, and Ellen to compose her countenance, Mrs. Grymes was announced. This worthy lady had a maid who minstered to her mistress's peculiarities. 'This girl, who usually sat at work at an upper window, had seen the ladies from the Priory go into the cottage, and this fact she communicated to her employer. Now Mrs. Grymes was rather piqued at not having been invited to any of those grand banquets which had

included the great people from great distances, such as Sir Guy and Lady Dacre, and other county magnates, and she was bent on taking another look at the second edition of "ingins," as she called the Pryors too; she had once dined there to meet the Pelhams, but sniffed at Mrs. Pelham; and although she had called since the Pryors' arrival, yet she had missed seeing that lady, and her curiosity was still unappeased,—she wanted to talk to the owner of such wonderful bonnets, shawls, and sables.

"Proud and haughty, no doubt, and looks down on us poor parsons' wives as if we were dirt." For Mrs. Grymes did not *think* in choice language. She put on her best things, and hurried down, intending to drop in by accident on "dear Mrs. Mildmay," but she was stopped, first by one interruption, and then by another, until time passed quicker than she thought for, and the lady guests were gone before she reached the Cottage, but only to afford her a much richer treat, as she "caught them in the fact," as she boasted afterwards.

"In what fact, my dear?" asked the Vicar.

"Why that shameless hypocrite of a woman, only a minute after receiving the great people,

honoured guests of her patroness, as if she was their equal, (actually had tea too for them, for the things were there, and four dirty cups as witnesses of it), was positively sitting there as bold as you please, and with her eyes red, as if she had been crying too, and entertaining that fellah, that Williams! But I will make it my business to let Mr. Chetwynd know of her carryings on, and how his poor blind old mother is imposed upon; but *I* caught them in the *fact*."

"I think it would be far better, my dear, if you attended to our business, and left Mr. Chetwynd to look after his own family affairs. Mrs. Mildmay has always been a most exemplary woman, and, you may depend upon it, whatever '*fact*' you caught her in was right, whatever it might seem to you; I have faith in her."

"Yes, I know you, Doctor, you are as blind as a mole, and you call that Christian charity! As sure as I am a sinner there is something between those two!"

"Nothing more likely, *something* perhaps of Christian charity and good fellowship, a scarce commodity in this parish," and saying this, the Vicar vanished.

All this had taken place after she went home.

Nothing could have been more bland than her manner during her visit. She was *so* delighted to see her dear friend looking *so* well.

"A little cold in your eyes though, *I think?*"

"No, thank you! I have no cold in my eyes, I am happy to say, but I have been listening to some melancholy recitals about some old friends, and I have been moved to tears."

"You always were a dear sympathetic creature, so at least Dr. Grymes says; and how is dear Lady Agnes, and your charming niece, and the interesting Indian ladies, her daughter and guest? I am so full of parish business, for some of the visitors are so irregular and uncertain! Don't think I am come to scold *you*, the Vicar says we must leave such things to conscience; but to return, Where was I? Oh! I remember, I was going to say I had no time to pay my respects since the dinner (and she did not say 'to which I was *not* invited')."

"They are all quite well, thank you, although Mrs. Pelham still feels her debility occasionally."

"Ah, those Indian climates! *You* can tell us something about *them*, Mr. Williams."

"I have never been in India."

"Not in India! Why, then, where was it I heard you came from?"

"Possibly Australia."

"Yes; that was it! I knew it was somewhere where they *send* people, you know." And Mrs. Grymes twinkled her little eyes at Nellie, as if she had said a clever thing. Caleb only laughed.

"Yes, it is where they *send* people, Mrs. Grymes, only I was not *sent*. I was only taken there by chance, and against my will."

Here was an admission to treasure up!

"And did you find it very hot or very cold?"

"Both; very hot, and very cold."

"But you had natives to wait on you?"

"No; we had to wait on ourselves."

"Not even *convicts*, Mr. Williams?"

"Not even convicts, Mrs. Grymes. I was not one of those fortunate men who had assigned servants to work for them, and to pollute their homes with their violence, and their vice, and foul language. I had to do all on my own hook for myself, and, what is more, I left it on my own hook, too. You see I have brought home some colonial slang."

Mrs. Grymes believed as much of that as she pleased, and no more. *She* knew better than that. He was just a returned convict, and nothing more. Robert Chetwynd was right, as she would

take care and let him know, and then what would that sly, proud scion of the Wilbrahams have to say for herself? Harboursing such *scum*, and introducing them to respectable houses!

She had never heard of any losses at the Priory, but that fellow might have taken untold wealth from that house, and that poor old blind lady be none the wiser. Oh, the wickedness of some people! Sitting there crying with him too, and *owning it*, and as cool as a cucumber; but it should *not* last, that it should not. If the Vicar was such a poor spiritless creature (although he was doing nothing all day long but spiritual work), it was only the more necessary that she should look after the morals of the parish,—such an example to the humbler classes! And she reached a climax in her virtuous indignation. But Mrs. Grymes only *thought* this, she told Mr. Williams that the whole county was charmed with his picture of the Woodlandshire Archery Meeting, and proposed that he should set up regularly in the county town. She, for one, would do her best to get him patronage, and she was sure he could depend on the interest of their mutual friend, and she waved her hand towards Nellie.

"I am obliged for your kind offer, but I have other engagements which take me about. London is my headquarters."

"A very convenient place, and perhaps you could not prudently settle anywhere." And the amiable woman meant more than her words implied. "You are on the staff of the 'Illustrated News,' I think?"

"I contribute sometimes, as you may observe, but I belong to no particular staff. I take choice bits for artists' studies—foliage, water, rocks."

"Yes, and a wandering life is very convenient sometimes! But I must be going. Good-bye, dear Mrs. Mildmay, charmed to have seen you." And off she went.

Her virtue would have been compromised by remaining longer in such a scene.

Yes, she *was* charmed, but it was that she had obtained materials for a letter she decided on writing to her friend and ally, Robert Chetwynd, oily, bland, and inferring much about both.

"Well, that was an unlucky *rencontre*! I fear, Nellie, you will suffer for it. I am a selfish brute to come here and compromise you; but what can I do? Only for this house, and the shelter it has given me, the sympathy I have received

under this roof, life would have been even more unbearable than it is."

"I don't care, Caleb. I never did what I was ashamed of, and surely at my mature age I may have a friend of yours to visit me occasionally without having the slanderous tongues of a whole village levelled at me! But if they will talk, they must. You have not told me when you came here."

"As soon as your letter reached me, I determined to risk all, and look upon her once more unseen; so I came last night, and, as I told you, hung about *perdu* till they passed me in the grounds; then I saw that there had been no *éclaircissement*, though *she* knows, of course, who Ethel is. Do you think the old lady suspects?"

"No, I am quite sure she does not; and if she did, depend on it she would keep her suspicions to herself. Blanche has told me often that Ethel's mother is dead in her hearing, and she has preserved the same calm face."

"When *Mrs. Pryor* sees that picture, she will require some nerve to keep up, I think."

"Oh! Nellie, go there to-morrow and see what comes of it."



"You may depend on Ethel, if it rests with her. Nothing you told her has she ever repeated to me, nor has she asked me a single question about you."

"What a discipline for one so young! And Gilbert, what is he about?"

"He is abroad still. I think that there must be some indefinite understanding between them, because she is so indifferent to Guy Dacre; there would be a good thing for her, if she would only think so."

"Gilbert is too worldly."

"He never would have made the fool of himself I have done. We can never have perfection, Nellie. It is better to be on the safe side; and worldliness *wears* best, in the long run, I believe."

Then he went away, and Mrs. Grymes knew the hour and the minute when the little gate shut on him. That night he went by the coach and train to London.

The following day, in all the glory of her best dress, Mrs. Grymes was seen to emerge from the Vicarage, and, after sailing up the carriage-drive, she was ushered into the presence of Lady Agnes.

She was profuse in her apologies for her neglect, meaning a covert rebuke for theirs, and then she soon broke into her subject.

"I had only time to pay a short visit to our friend at the Cottage yesterday, and I heard you had been there a few moments before. I was so sorry to miss you, Miss Chetwynd. How glad you must have been to see Mr. Williams again; your old friend, the artist, I mean."

"Mr. Williams! I have not seen him; I am so glad he is come!"

"Why, I met him at Mrs. Mildmay's; and, indeed, I fear I was like Paul Pry—I came when when I was not wanted,—though I did not wish to intrude on a *tête-à-tête*, I assure you, and they seemed so comfortable together; it was a sin to disturb them, so I left him there."

"How very odd!" said Ethel, colouring violently. "Ellen never told me so; he must have gone in after I left."

"Ah! my dear; I am like the peacock, I could a *tail* unfold, but I won't; I keep it shut down tight," and she stroked the skirt of her dress. "It does not answer for parsons' wives to talk of what they see and know; it is 'chatter and gossip,' but they know enough."

"Too much, occasionally," remarked Lady Agnes; "and few of them can resist the unfurling of those same tails. I have a great respect for Mr. Williams. I am blind, it is true; but I have an instinctive perception of who *are*, and who are *not* gentlemen—and *ladies*," she added, after an emphatic pause. "Mr. Williams is a gentleman, whether his coat is shabby or not, and he never was anything else; and it is impertinent in us to pry into his antecedents if he wishes to conceal them. I am glad that he is come, for I want him to take Mrs. Pelham and her children; and perhaps Mrs. Pryor may have a commission for him."

"Yes; I should very much like to have him to take us all; he has such wonderful taste in arranging postures and *entourage*."

Mrs. Grymes was crestfallen, but her quiver was not empty yet; she had one more arrow, and that a poisoned one. "Yes," said she; "it is a great pity people will say such things of the poor man, and his gentlemanly manners confirm the slander. People say that he was transported for forgery, and when his time was out, perhaps before, he came home, and not liking to disgrace his family he will not appear among them, so he

makes a sort of living by his calling, for I don't suppose we can call it a profession. Mrs. Mildmay knows the whole story, for she told me she did; and he owned to Australia quite boldly to me, as if I did not know what that means! 'But it is a long lane,' my dear lady; you know the rest. We must hope for the best, and the clergy must be charitable, as I told him yesterday. He is secure of our patronage, and yours, for wherever there is reformation there is hope, and he really seems very harmless now. Such a comfort! The Prodigal Son, my dear lady, and the Thief on the Cross! all beautiful examples for us to imitate!"

She had quite run herself out, and had to stop for want of breath. All the ladies sat silent. Ethel with heightened colour and tingling ears, until Mrs. Grymes's last similes overshot her mark, and brought a rebellious smile to her lips. Lady Agnes was stern and erect; Blanche curious and anxious for more, sniffing some exciting interludes to give variety to their rather flat life; and Edith, with her own secret sin ever before her, and the vision of a certain lost Prodigal perpetually rising to torture her—Edith was pale, silent, too, and angry.

"There are a few, I ought rather to say, a great many more texts we should take to heart, Mrs. Grymes," at length observed Lady Agnes, after a protracted pause; "but the spirit of them all is in this case the same,—that it is cruel to revive or extend such stories as you have just recounted, and which *I* do not believe, if you do. The best way to serve Mr. Williams would be never to allow such surmises to pass your lips again, unless to allow him to disprove them. I can answer, I hope, for *my* family here present."

"And you may for me, I am sure," said Edith.

"I included you, my dear, mentally."

Then all chimed in with an eager assent,—the thing must never be alluded to again, on pain of Lady Agnes's displeasure.

Mrs. Grymes was rather disconcerted that this, her best and last arrow, should have so signally missed the mark. It was time for her to go, she said, and this she did in a few moments, feeling considerably crestfallen, but looking amiably smirking.

"What an odious woman that is," was Blanche's first observation. "Why will clergymen fall into such traps? If I had been living here, that dear old Vicar should never have been caught in her

meshes. You don't know how skilful I am in matchmaking and matchbreaking, when I see people going to ruin each others' happiness. Such work as I had in India !"

"My dear, you are in England now, and if people fall into traps, they must keep in them. I would not interfere, though it grieved me at the time; and I should have liked it for Nellie, for his sake as well as hers; and to this day I believe the Vicar honours her above all women, and that makes his wife so spiteful and detracting."

"Do you really think there is anything between her and that artist?"

"Certainly not. She and her husband both knew him in former years; but she told me she had promised him not to speak of his affairs; and Nellie is quite wise enough to be trusted with the management of her own."

Still Edith, whose maternal solicitude was quickened for Ethel, was made uneasy; her own slyness and evasions made her naturally suspicious of others; she summed up the result of her observation, and it alarmed her; she remembered Ethel's blush when the photographer's name was mentioned; the noise in the inner

room while she was at the Cottage; Ellen's confused manner (though it did not strike her at the moment); and, added to these, Mrs. Grymes's assertion, that he must have been in the house at the time, and she was troubled; she must see the man, if only because he had saved Ethel's life; she must employ him herself, and watch him closely, for even a reformed forger was no company for Ethel.

At the same time Ethel, being to a certain extent in Caleb's confidence, knowing from him that he had been her father's friend, and Nellie's too, and having heard him lament the injury he had once done them, began to ask herself how far Mrs. Grymes's tale might be founded on fact? Could there be a foundation of truth for her romance? Could his "*forgery*" have been the injury which he had inflicted on her father, and which he now bemoaned with unavailing sorrow? Then, the scene of the night before occurred to her. Could Mrs. Pryor, too, have known Caleb formerly, and would she recognize him as she recognized the picture? It was a very exciting reverie, from which she was rudely disturbed by her aunt's voice.

"I wish to goodness, Ethel, you would give

that swain of yours a little more hope, just to practise a little, dear, and keep the thing going. You might grow to like him in time, and you do not give him or yourself a fair chance. He is eligible in every way, and if he proposes, you can only refuse him. Such a triumph would be something before you were even presented. Quite a feather in your cap."

"Which swain? I don't understand you, Aunt Blanche."

"I am glad you do not, dear! Blanche, Ethel is not in India, and I would be very much displeased with her if I found her 'encouraging' any one. She is too young for such nonsense, whoever the 'swain' may be."

"Nonsense, Mamma; you *must* know the only possible one. Mr. Dacre, of course."

"I never gave him a thought, Blanche."

"Because you cannot see, dearest," was her blunt reply.

"I wish you had not said it, Aunt! It will make me feel so foolish in Mr. Dacre's company, and it is such an impossibility."

"Is it, indeed! That is an admission. And who may be the possible hero? The boy of your affections?"



"Blanche, I won't have such ideas put into the child's head! Ethel, love, forget your aunt's folly, and don't look foolish before Mr. Dacre, because we old people talk nonsense sometimes. Edith was trembling with excitement, as she watched the girl's countenance. She, as a stranger or a visitor, could not offer an observation on a question of such deep but secret interest to her. Ethel's blushes told her no definite tale,—young girls blush at anything; but she felt sorry to think that Guy Dacre had not established himself in her affections yet, and that Blanche's blunderings had defeated her own ends. Could Ethel care for any one else?"

Had Gilbert once favoured them with his company, Edith would have been soon put out of suspense; she would have detected at once that *something* which had evaded the purblind vigilance of Blanche.

Ethel was glad to escape to her own room that night as soon as possible; and once there alone, to sit down and ruminate on the complex nature of the various confidences thrust on her, and to compare them with Mrs. Grymes's crude scandal. She took up the thread of her meditations where it had been rudely broken off by her aunt.

Could Caleb Williams's mysterious sin have in any way effected that misery which was preying on Mrs. Pryor, and which her father seemed to have shared? Could she have ever known him, and if so, would they recognize each other if they met? Caleb Williams was probably an *alias* assumed to assist in his disguise; his own avowal sanctioned the surmise. She would give any thing to know the truth, but, bound by promises of secrecy and silence to each, she dare not inquire, or show the slightest curiosity; she must wait patiently the issue of events, and keep out of all further confidences, if possible. Already she felt in a waking nightmare, oppressed beyond endurance, and yet unable to move a muscle to release herself of the weight, for she must keep the sorrows of each distinct and inviolate. It was a terrible, if even a salutary, discipline for an open, frank nature such as Ethel's; but she had early learned, when most puzzled and perplexed, where to take her troubles, where to seek for support. It was her private altar, upon which she now cast all her anxieties.

Neither her grandmother nor Ellen were "high" or "low" or "broad" or "muscular," though each denomination might have accused them of

the failings of the other three. They were simple Churchwomen, Bible Christians, who took the Sermon on the Mount as their creed in practical duty. These had taught Ethel from the beginning where to ask for a help beyond all mortal power, even in her little childish tribulations, and without the external parade of religious convictions, etc. etc., it had become quite an instinct to her to ask for aid where she, in her simple though fervent faith, felt sure she would obtain it, directly or indirectly. Yet for what definite end could she pray now? She knew not—she could not tell, what would be best for her. She knew not what to ask; but she felt that she needed strength to be faithful and true and upright in all things; and for these gifts she prayed fervently—strength and wisdom to avoid compromising those who were, they said, in her power—to “be faithful in *all things*.”

Ethel felt a strange yearning towards the gentle woman who had unfolded to her a portion of her inner life. She had called her “my darling,” and “my child;” and, although such endearments might only be Italian forms of speech, still they were pleasant from her. She prayed for her, too—for a way for her out of all her

mysterious troubles ; that she might receive that support which her soft, yielding character seemed to require so much.

Edith Pryor said she was not very well that evening ; the subdued excitement of Mrs. Grymes's visit had been too much for her, coupled with the tension of her critical position in that house. Conscientiousness was very fully developed in her character in spite of those opposing qualities, the fruit of her early deficiencies of education, and the circumstances which developed them. However contradictory this may seem, it was the case ; her utter weakness of character had made her a prey alternately to one or the other ; and the unceasing turmoil of these warring influences made her miserable. Too weak to resist the sin, she was too good to commit it without remorse. She was one who could never *harden* for good or evil ; like wax, she melted before the stronger influence of the moment whichever it happened to be. There were times at the Priory when she felt happier than she had done for years, when risk in the present, and remorse for the past, were both forgotten in contemplating Ethel's security ; but the reaction was strong in proportion.

## CHAPTER XII.

## SYMPATHETIC INK.

BUT we must go back a little. Mrs. Grymes had scarcely gone, in fact, the odour of her highly-perfumed handkerchief, in which musk predominated, still pervaded the room when Ellen Mildmay entered.

"Your ears are burning, I am sure," said Ethel, "right and left! We have just been sitting upon you, and the jury being divided, have discharged themselves without a verdict!"

"Ethel! Take care, my child, don't let your tongue take too much licence," said Lady Agnes.

"Oh, Nellie will understand my meaning soon. I only wish she had come in a few moments sooner."

"She has come in time to plead guilty, or not guilty, to the charge of enslaving that mysterious artist; and also in time to take our commands to her humble servant to appear before us two ladies, who desire that he shall immortalize our charms. Here is Mrs. Pryor dying to see this mysterious Cyclops, who has fascinated and enslaved the highly proper and decorous Mrs. Mildmay."

"I don't understand you, Blanche, in the least, although, as I met Mrs. Grymes in the grounds, and she saw Mr. Williams at the Cottage yesterday, after Mrs. Pryor and Ethel left, I suppose she has been *improving the occasion*."

"Exactly so! You have guessed right, cousin mine, although her 'improvements' are questionable. She only accuses you, however, of harbouring a returned convict, a *ci-devant* forger, who left his country for his country's good, and who has now returned to find more favour with a certain lady, who shall be nameless, than with his own family. Guilty, or not guilty?"

"Guilty! with extenuating circumstances," said Nellie, laughing, though her cheeks burned with indignation; "guilty on the counts affecting myself, as far as truth goes; but as Mr. Williams was never a forger, or a convict, her

story loses much of its piquant raciness on investigation ; however, as I do not intend to satisfy Mrs. Grymes's malevolent curiosity, I fear it must remain what she has made it, a myth. I am not at liberty to tell Mrs. Grymes those portions of Mr. Williams's antecedents which he has confided to me as an old acquaintance ; in fact, by doing so, I might injure those who least suspect it. He certainly is not responsible to Mrs. Grymes, neither am I."

Ethel's eyes glistened. " Another ray of light on that strange story ! Another link in that disjointed chain she was trying to unite. That man was my father's friend ; Mrs. Pryor was also my father's friend : her secret would ruin her ; his secret would ruin some one else. Could they have ever known each other ? "

Ethel sat " in a brown study," as Blanche said, after she was tired of talking herself.

Edith, too, sat and listened.

" Will you kindly tell this interesting gentleman that I am anxious to give him a commission ? I want Mousie's picture ; and I have promised my own *carte* to dozens of people ; and I have heard so much of this Mr. Williams that I am determined he alone shall take us."

"Oh, yes, and I am dying to see your Cyclops, Nellie ; quite a character, I should say."

"I am sorry to say I think you will be disappointed at present, then, for Mr. Williams was only passing through Northgate, and came over to Woolerton yesterday on business, which business he was discussing with me when Mrs. Grymes called and interrupted us. He did not have his camera with him, and he left by the mail last night for London."

"How *excessively* provoking!" said Blanche. "I am wild to see this man, and to judge if Mrs. Grymes has any foundation for her little romance."

"In *my* young days neither matrons nor maidens thought it decorous to 'run wild' about a travelling artist, or thought it correct to couple their names or their friend's names with such men, as it seems they are presuming to couple Nellie's with Mr. Williams. I am compelled to say, if language or manners are criterions of gentility, Nellie need not be ashamed of her suspected admirer. Nellie, I hope you don't encourage the Vicar to pay you *pastoral* attentions, for I believe that is at the bottom of it all. Nellie was rather—or I should perhaps say the



Vicar was rather impressed with Nellie once, only she did not meet him half-way, and some one else crossed the street to catch him."

"Is it so? Ah," said Blanche, "if *I* had been at home I should have managed the affair for those who could not do it for themselves. That poor man is wrecked,—she is an awful woman."

Nellie was glad that the conversation was diverted from herself. She was anxious to discover the effect of the picture on Mrs. Pryor, but neither her face nor Ethel's betrayed anything. She came to stay for the evening, she said, if they would have her, and she soon found herself in Ethel's room, taking off her walking garments.

"What does Mrs. Pryor think of your pictures?"

"She was greatly struck by them; wondered, as Aunt Blanche does, at my luxurious apartments and their fitting-up." But Ethel's back was turned, and she was very busy in a distant corner of the room. A glance, however, was enough. Ellen saw that something had passed; how much she could not tell, for, as she wrote to Caleb, "She would not trust her honest face to me, lest it should betray involuntarily more than she wished. Edith at least must know who she

is, and is tranquilly happy. I had not the cruelty to speak of the picture in her presence. I shrank from the fearful subject for her sake, and the terrible consequences to her of any *éclaircissement*."

Meanwhile it was no part of Robert's tactics to allow his sister to get the "upper hand" at the Priory. Dora was still at school, and Marion rebellious at being always kept abroad. She wanted to watch Robert now, especially on his visits to the Priory, and she wanted to see Blanche, so she insisted on his taking her home with him:

Although Marion was no favourite with her mother-in-law, who called her a "frivolous, empty-headed little thing," the old lady on the first hint of Robert's wishes and Marion's hopes, made Ethel invite them both to spend the Christmas and a month or two besides among them all, that the brother and sister and their respective husband and wife might become better acquainted with each other.

Ethel wrote the letter as a painful duty. She felt an instinctive certainty that her uncle was her natural enemy, but the rough angles of her character, which used to cause abrasions, had been smoothed down a little. They rubbed smoothly

together now, but, like billiard balls, still repelling each other, and concealing their mutual dislike under formal politeness.

No one was more alive to the existence of this feeling than Lady Agnes. She knew her son's soreness on the vexed question of Ethel's status, but she had made her will and settled that question, she said, and Robert must make the best of it. He had no son, and Charlie's daughter had as good, if not a better, right than Dora to whatever she had to leave. She would help Robert now and then, and she might even destroy some of the securities which she had obliged him to give for all she had advanced through her lawyers, but she knew he gambled, and all the once fine Chetwynd patrimony should not be thus squandered; she had made up her mind on the subject, and therefore she dismissed it. At least it should lie fallow until Ethel's marriage or her own death, and then Robert might give way to his impotent rage as much as he pleased; but in the meantime he was her son, and she must make the best of him.

Mrs. Grymes had thought it her imperative duty to write to Mr. Chetwynd on the return of "a certain suspicious character to the village,"

but—alas for her vigilance!—as her pen flew swiftly over her paper, the wheels of the train were flying more swiftly still which conveyed her quarry beyond her grasp. Her letter reached Robert the morning he was leaving Baden, and it hurried his journey homewards. He must see that man and put an end to this mysterious and uncertain state of things. He *must* see him, and, if he was *the man*, know his game, buy him off at any price, or get rid of him; for while matters remained in their present state, life was intolerable.

In this frame of mind he arrived at his mother's home.

Gilbert, too, had returned to England about the same time; he ran down for a day to tell them all he had done and seen on the Alps, to impress the Pelhams with his manifold perfections, to steal a *tête-à-tête* with Ethel, and then to start away again to some friend's place pheasant-shooting.

In that short meeting he contrived to tell Ethel that he was quite "used up," and longed for quiet, but until the house was clear he could not remain in it for any time. He was very plausible, and she very tender and true, and in

her own truth believed in his. It was a great comfort to her to see him, and his soft, insinuating voice lingered like sweet echoes on her ear after he was gone. He had called her "his own," his "best," his "dearest." It was something quite beautiful to see his attention to Lady Agnes; it is in fact at all times pleasant to behold the deference of a young and popular man towards an aged and infirm woman. It was Gilbert's most effective rôle. He was courteous and polite to Mr. and Mrs. Pryor, a dutiful nephew to his uncle and aunt, but to Robert and his wife, merely polite. Neither men ventured to enter upon the subject uppermost with both, and in the presence of Mr. Pelham and Mr. Pryor, a *tête-à-tête* by accident was not easily managed.

Soon after his arrival, Robert renewed the subject he had before urged upon his mother,—the advantage of placing herself under an oculist of world-wide celebrity, who visited London every spring. They were all in England now, he said, and he could take a house in town for a few months, and Ethel could accompany her on a visit to Marion and himself; and then, if the oculist saw reason to hope for a favourable re-

sult, she could undergo the operation, which was very simple.

Blanche put in her claim, but was repulsed; she could be as much as she pleased with her mother, but he must have her under his own roof at that critical time. He did not say so, but both Marion and he built on the Pelhams for gaiety, carriages, and amusements; and wherever Lady Agnes was living, the house would have to be kept quiet, at any rate when the operation was performed.

He was very indignant at Caleb's absence from Woodlandshire. "Baffled again, by Heaven! and that fellow stealing about in my absence, without even a camera as his excuse!" This Mrs. Grymes had told him since his return.

Once more he put an advertisement in the 'Times,' inviting him to present himself to certain solicitors and hear of something to his advantage; but in reply he only got the following letter and enclosure:—

"Robert Chetwynd, have a care! When you and I meet, it will be a bitter day for you; let well alone, and I will let you alone, although I know *all*, and will act on what I do know, if

you force me to it. I enclose a souvenir of the past, the meaning of which you will appreciate."

The souvenir was another copy of the photograph !

As usual, the letters were distributed at the breakfast-table, when all the family was assembled, and again Robert was seized with a "spasm," and rose to seek for brandy, but Marion rushed to his assistance and secured the letter and its contents,—this act restored him, "Woman, are you mad? How dare you?" All self-command had left him, and he was reckless of the observation he was exciting. Marion restored the letter at once, but she had felt the photo in it; she saw the wondering faces around her, and was anxious to cover her husband's "attacks" from notice; she laughed a little hard laugh, and said, therefore,

"Why, Robert, you are quite ridiculous! you know I was only in fun! I begin to think it is some ladylove's photo, and I am consumed with jealousy and curiosity."

"Your curiosity shall never be satisfied then," saying which he threw the envelope and its contents in the fire; then, looking still very

ghastly, he too laughed harshly and said, "That is a part of my method of enforcing discipline on a curious, jealous wife. How do you manage, George?" and he turned to his sister's husband.

"Blanche manages me better, I am afraid, don't you, old woman?"

"So well that no one sees the reins. But, Robert, that is a bad plan to burn a letter before you can well know its contents,—evidence of importance has often been thus destroyed; even a bit of paper is sometimes of consequence, you know."

"I know an instance, and I dare say Robert remembers it," said Lady Agnes, who now spoke for the first time, "when a rash act of the kind destroyed an important family document. The lesson he received then should have been a warning to him. I don't like to see men burn letters in a hurry; it is a bad habit and a bad sign."

"Marion is so deucedly curious; and when a man is entrusted with the confidence of other men, honour to them makes it a necessity."

"Even photos?" said Marion. She was red with passion, and there were symptoms of a matrimonial "scrimmage," when George Pelham rose to the rescue.



"Come, Robert, and take a cheroot;" and Robert was glad to escape the silent scrutiny of the ladies, so he followed his brother-in-law from the room.

Edith sat pale and silent,—she was too nervous to bear a scene of any kind; and Ethel felt sure she had seen the writing on the envelope before, and she had felt the card within as she had distributed the letters.

"What has Uncle Robert to do with him? Another link! but how can it fit in with the others? Is he mixed up in it too? if so, I am sure it is for no good purpose."

As Robert smoked the fine Manilla cheroot with which George Pelham supplied him, he let off his superfluous steam in a sort of universal invective. He, as usual, propounded his favourite doctrine of the three orders of women, and gently and guardedly he managed to include his mother, wife, and sister in the first class,—his most favoured list of fools.

"My dear fellow, you don't know Blanche; she is no fool, I can tell you, though she hides her amazing sense under that gay, trifling air; and you certainly would scarcely venture to call your sister one of the others to *me*. She was

my prime minister in India; Blanche is no common order of woman, I can tell you. Then there is Ethel; that girl has a grand soul, it seems to shine out on you through her eyes. She is a fine creature, by Jove!"

Robert mercifully let her pass with one observation.

"It is rather in spite of, than in consequence of her training, then,—my mother would not listen to me on that subject."

"Why, Mrs. Mildmay educated her, and she seems a most admirable woman."

"Chacun à son goût," and Robert shrugged his shoulders. "My mother is infatuated about her, and *she*—Ellen is no fool, at any rate."

Robert knew that nettles stung most when lightly applied, so he felt that was enough for Nellie, but George took it up.

"I don't think Lady Agnes overrates her. I consider her a very superior woman."

"And the majority of the world agrees with you, but she and I, I confess, do not hit it; we never did, though we never quarrel. She doesn't like me, and perhaps with reason, but I would not for the world insinuate anything against her as my mother's cousin, of course." And one

eyebrow went up just a very little,—it was a habit common to the three, Marion, Dora, and himself, and he looked askance at Mr. Pelham.

Now Robert was no favourite with Pelham, but from thenceforth the Anglo-Indian had an undefined suspicion that Robert, like Mrs. Grymes and the peacock, “could a tail unfold,” and that family considerations withheld him from doing so in Mrs. Mildmay’s case.

It is thus that the purest and the noblest characters can be blighted with safety. Not by outspoken assertions; oh, no, they are weapons too heavy and clumsy by far for skilful hands. A sigh, a shake of the head, a “deep regret,” a “deep interest,” are the more effective instruments for more refined manipulations; and the most potent of all weapons for the destruction of our dearest friends is Christian charity and forgiveness! With it we can heap coals of fire on the heads of our adversaries in a very different spirit to the one intended by our Divine Master. Forgive those you dislike, and they must have done something to be forgiven; be merciful, and they must have deserved mercy. Abstain from direct slander, nay, discourage it; admit your friend’s failings with a sigh, say “who is

without them?" but do so with a significant and by all means benevolent expression of countenance, and the stain is made, only in sympathetic ink perhaps, which does not show at first, but it will come out vividly at the *right time*.

Men and women, honest, pure, and true, have gone down to their graves by scores, victims under the subtle effects of this intangible moral poison, cleverly administered by dear and effusive friends. It is a safe operation generally, and seldom detected until too late.

Give me a good hearty, honest enemy, let him trumpet forth my sins loudly (in these days when physical encounters are rare between men), let the world judge between us, and say if I deserve his accusations; but save me from the insidious poison of a professing friend, whose heart has no concern for me, whose secret instincts are against me!

It was Robert Chetwynd's interest to depreciate Ellen Mildmay, because he felt that she knew more than he liked, and he therefore wished to anticipate her future attempts by casting an intangible doubt on her. He was not a man, as we know, to stick at trifles where his interests were at stake.

To accuse would have been to give her a chance of defence, so he only slightly sprinkled her with sympathetic ink, in the full confidence that it would come out *dark* at a convenient season.

To make her testimony worthless, her assertions received with caution, her honour and purity to be questioned, to strengthen insensibly Mrs. Grymes's clumsy malevolence, were all so many steps towards his future ends; and he was not quite unsuccessful. In a cabinet council held under the canopy of the state bed of the Priory, George Pelham told his wife that he feared there were *some* grounds for thinking there was more than met the eye in Ellen. Robert reluctantly admitted as much in fact, though evidently wishing to remove the impression he had inadvertently given; and as the ex-governor was considered an astute man, even in his dealings with Orientals, who could question his conclusions?

Poor shallow mortals! How little can we see occasionally of the truth! How much do we often see which does not exist!

## CHAPTER XIII.

## CHARLIE'S MOTHER!—FAREWELL!

It must not be supposed that Robert forgot the warning he received again for the third time. He was now quite convinced that the photographer was his enemy, that whatever was remaining to him of peace, of reputation, of position was in this man's keeping. If such were the case, he must relinquish his intention of hunting him to earth. "*Let well alone, and I will let you alone.*" Those words were not to be slighted; he would let him alone *directly*. Yet if he did now and then slyly throw discredit on him and on Nellie, he could not trace it. He had been asleep all this time, and must now be up and doing. His mother should not be left again to

the influence of that set; he must get her under his own control. If he tried properly, he knew he would succeed in the end; and the neighbourhood should know, through Mrs. Grymes, that he had very cogent reasons for removing even his niece from *local influences*. He left people to guess the nature of these "local influences," and he was not responsible for the correctness or incorrectness of their surmises. Chetwynd Park was still let, so he had a good excuse for taking a furnished house in town for the season, and making arrangements for the operation which Lady Agnes at length consented to undergo. His mother's blindness was in some respects a convenience to him; but, on the other hand, he knew that, were she to recover her sight, her gratitude to him would more than counterbalance this; his mother would be less dependent on these two women, who wrote and read all her letters, and thus knew too much.

Introduce Ethel into the great world and she would soon neglect her grandmother. Devotion was a good thing enough and easy where there were no temptations to the contrary. He would manage to alienate them *somehow*, but chance must determine the "*how*."

Notwithstanding Mr. Pelham's indignant protests, Robert still mentally included his sister among the fools in whom, as tools, his heart rejoiced. That Blanche had a price he was certain; all women have, he thought. He would stimulate her jealousy. Why should she, an only daughter and a woman of experience and position, give place to a young chit of doubtful birth, an illegitimate granddaughter? These, however, were only floating ideas, the suggestions of one of his familiar *genii*, the prompter, good or bad angel (whoever he may be), one of whom guides us in our path through life; and oh, how fervently should we all pray for *that* influence which alone can guide us in the strait and narrow way! After the arrival of Robert and his wife, and the return of Mr. Pelham and Mr. Pryor, a fresh round of dinners had commenced, all intended as complimentary to the dear old lady who had won the love and respect of all her neighbours, though, of course, she never took part in these festivities except in her own house.

Edith Pryor would gladly have escaped these parties; the demon of fear had held her in possession since her return to England, though of what she scarcely knew. Her husband, on



the contrary, had begun to thaw towards his countrymen, and, in a party of intimates, could now, with their support, be very agreeable; so, to please him, his wife went too, and she had at least the gratification of seeing Ethel admired, for in addition to Guy Dacre, there were several young county scions who would have been at her feet if they had had the slightest encouragement. The Pryors had been "going" for some time, but first one dinner and then another, for which they were induced to stop, had delayed their departure. At length Mr. Pryor said they must go on the Thursday which succeeded a Tuesday upon which a dinner at Dacrelands was to come off. As evening advanced Edith declared she found herself quite unequal to the drive, there and back, of seven miles in full dress; therefore, an hour or two before the rest of the party started, she determined not to accompany them. She was really too ill, and they all saw it; so, with many injunctions to "take care of herself," she was left well-becushioned and beshawled and befurred, extended on the same sofa, in Lady Agnes's room, on which she had been placed on that first day of her arrival. Lady Agnes occupied her usual place on the opposite side of

the fireplace, and they determined, as they assured the others, to have a cosy evening together.

We all know how an intimacy increases under such circumstances, and the old lady was always a charming companion when she liked; but from the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh generally, and consequently the conversation soon drifted from the dress and general appearance of the departing company, to Ethel's dress and Ethel's looks and Ethel altogether. Then the old lady was drawn into reverting more freely to the past, as it concerned her darling, as it seemed, with an end towards sounding Edith. At length, after some pause, she said,—

“By the bye” (*à propos* of nothing, apparently, of which they had been speaking), “Blanche told me one day that you had a son called Douglas, and she fancied your father's name was also ‘Douglas.’ Your name is Edith; do you know of any other Edith Douglas—a cousin, perhaps, of your own?”

She spoke very low, and there was a strange intensity in the tones in which the question was asked, as if life itself depended on the issue. Edith was thankful that she could not see her as

she answered her, with forced calmness, by asking her another question,—

“Did you know her?”

“Yes; and I loved her very dearly, poor child—had a deep interest in her; but I have lost all trace of her for many years, and I fear she is dead; but I should be glad to find her out *quietly* if I could, for she had great sorrows, poor thing. If she is any relative of yours and you know what has become of her, tell me. I am not disposed to gossip, and mine is a true and loving interest, I assure you.”

“The Edith you knew *is* dead—dead to the world, at least—for ever; yes, for ever now!” And then, as if seized by some sudden impulse, one she could no longer restrain, and against which she had been struggling ever since she came to the house, she silently slipped from among her multifarious wraps, threw herself on the rug which separated them, and put her head on the old lady's knees.

“Mother, Mother!” wailed she; “Charlie's mother, the only true mother I ever knew! the friend who stood by me in the hour of my terrible woe, who would have been my comfort always, if she could. Don't betray me; my husband does not know.”

A long silence ensued—their hearts were both too full for utterance.

“Your voice, my child, seemed a re-echo of the past, but I am sometimes mistaken; and I only began to suspect when Blanche mentioned your son’s name by chance. My poor injured child! May God sustain and comfort you! Get up, dear, and tell me all. My poor Charlie’s widow, my Ethel’s mother! open your heart to me, my child, and all you tell me will be as sacred as the grave.”

“I am better here; I can sit on this stool at your feet.” And there she sat, and told her sad and trying history since they parted in that old Norman inn.

“It is too late to undeceive Mr. Pryor now; he is a good man, and a most indulgent husband, but he is peculiar, and he never would love or trust me again if he knew of this long deceit. I could not stand his anger—I should die. It is unspeakable comfort to see you, to thank you for all you have done for Ethel—to see her what you and Mrs. Mildmay have made her, but it would kill me for any *dénouement* to take place now. My own people never knew of my first marriage, and yours believe Charlie’s wife dead.

Leave me then in the grave, for Ethel's sake."

And it really seemed the wiser plan.

After a long and confidential evening, during which each gave the other notice of how far it was safe to venture in allusions to the past, they separated for bed, both anxious to avoid the returning party until they had recovered their agitation; this had so far subsided by morning, that they were able to meet at breakfast and resume their conventional relations before the family.

The next day the Pryors departed for Lincolnshire, with promises of renewing their intimacy in town in spring.

The quiet dignity of Lady Agnes, acquired during a long life of painful practice, and by the necessary diplomacy of years, made it easy for her to conceal what she had discovered. It was with mingled pleasure and anxiety, however, that she contemplated this discovery. No *éclaircissement* she was very sure could take place without a great family commotion—a turmoil such as she dreaded and shrank from. If Ethel ever required her mother, it would be time enough then to tell her. Ignorance was now bliss, and therefore it was best as Edith wished it; in fact, without her release she had no alternative but to keep her promise.

The family enjoyed their Christmas festival together. It was years since they had all been assembled under their mother's roof at that time ; and even Robert grew into something more genial and pleasant, and dispensed his mother's gratuities with a lavish hand among the poor. Dora alone was absent, and she was better pleased to remain among the Christmas-trees and other seasonable spectacles of foreign life, than to return to that sombre, dreadful Priory, she said, where her reminiscences of her long cousin, and the whole establishment were anything but pleasant. The photographer had vanished for good it seemed, and nothing of moment occurred until late in January. Then the Pelhams went to town to prepare for the season, and Robert and Marion followed to look for a house suitable for them all to occupy. This accomplished, Robert was to return and escort his mother and Ethel to town.

"Robert has grown as good as gold," was the old lady's comment to Nellie. She gave Mr. Pelham credit for this, for having exercised a salutary influence over her son ; but the fact was, the wily creature knew it was his best chance of obtaining power over her. It had been rather more lively in Woodlandshire than usual during

this recent visit; he had had healthy rational amusement, and no gambling to keep up a morbid irritation of temper, so he really was "improved," as Marion rather too frankly admitted, though his "spasms" still haunted her imagination, and his secret correspondence poisoned her life. She doubted and distrusted him, and he *knew it*. The effect of this was to make him curtail her means of satisfying her curiosity, and she suffered indirectly in other ways. Notwithstanding his apparent improvement, day and night Robert was haunted by the vision suggested by that photo. Day and night he speculated upon what might come of it all, how it might affect him should there be "any change," by which he indicated to himself his mother's death.

It is astonishing in what decorous words we can clothe a wicked idea when we wish to reconcile our conscience to its contemplation. Robert believed himself to be a good son, yet his mother's death was the goal to which he always looked forward for clearing up his difficulties. The will she had made calmed her mind and lulled her into false security he thought, but it would be worthless unless those certificates could be produced at the right time. If the photograph

was a true copy, then the original must have been in existence very lately. There might be a mine under his feet, ready to explode at any moment, and yet he dare not, after that last letter, raise a finger to avert it. He, however, would not be frightened out of his determination. He would be civil to Ethel under protest, but he would never directly acknowledge her legitimacy until these missing proofs were produced. There must be some hitch, or there would not be this mystery, and it was his best chance to avail himself of the weakness of his adversaries. Let her mother's people come forward. Ethel must not marry,—a settlement would destroy his hopes at once; but he thought that by skilful management he could prevent such a catastrophe without awakening his mother's vigilance. All depended on her being lulled into a false security; yet with these schemes for ever whirling in his brain, Robert seemed attentive and considerate for his mother's welfare and comfort. He was conscious of standing at present in a favourable light, and this consciousness pleased and satisfied him, and caused a little of that light to be reflected on those around him. But it was a deceitful gleam,—the gleam of the setting sun re-



flected by a neighbouring window, soon to vanish and leave but a greater gloom behind.

Mr. Pelham at once decided on a house at Prince's Gate. He could not bear a stuffy London street, he said, and there he had space and air outside, if it were impossible to obtain it inside of his dwelling. Robert was not so easily satisfied; he had to think of economy as well as accommodation, and to reconcile these opposing conditions. At length he hit on a small house in Curzon Street, with a suite of rooms over the drawing-rooms for his mother's exclusive use. Many letters passed before both parties were satisfied, for, in the end, when the house suited Lady Agnes, Robert discovered it was "beyond his means," and the upshot was, that she agreed to pay the rent.

As soon as Robert was fairly off, Caleb reappeared, on this occasion to take some skating matches which were coming off at Sir Guy Dacre's.

Woolerton and Northgate were divided in their opinions about his return; some said, "after all people know'd about him now, he had a sight of brass to show the piece of his face that was left to people." Others, that they did not believe he

was a forger, but he was a photographer, and they had seen in the papers that bank-notes could be copied that way. They generally ended by saying "there must be summut in it all surely;" but what that "summut" was, they could not say.

Hearing all this, Caleb at once opened the matter to Sir Guy Dacre privately. He said it was a duty he owed him to assure him he had never been a convict, but that family affairs had made him an exile to Australia; that now, on his return, he found the life he was leading more congenial to his feelings than any other; that he had not renewed his intercourse with his family, because they believed him dead, and he did not care to undeceive them.

There is a freemasonry between true gentlemen irrespective of worldly position, and Sir Guy Dacre believed him without reserve.

Then Caleb called at the Priory, and asked to see Lady Agnes; it was the first time he had ever taken the liberty except on business, he said—

"I have taken the liberty of waiting on your ladyship to express my regret that it was utterly out of my power to obey your summons when required to take your guests, and also to offer to

you, my first patroness in Woodlandshire, an explanation which painful circumstances make necessary."

Ethel was present watching the workings of his face.

Lady Agnes signified that she was ready to listen, observing first, however, "My daughter was anxious to employ you, so was Mrs. Pryor, her friend; and I hoped they might have been useful patronesses to you, even in town or in Lincolnshire."

"I am exceedingly grateful to your ladyship, but it was utterly out of my power to avail myself of your consideration. My second object was to assure you that a malicious report that I hear has been circulated about the neighbourhood to injure me, has no foundation in fact. You were my first patroness, and I should be sorry that you should believe that you had bestowed your kindness on an unworthy object. I hear that I am said to be a returned convict and a forger. Will you believe my simple assurance that I am neither?"

"I could never believe it of you; your voice satisfies me, and I judge by the voice now more than by any other test. It seems a new gift, to

compensate for my other infirmity. Your voice has been as 'a song of the olden time' to me, so like it is to one I used to love to hear long, long ago."

Tears, unusual to her, coursed her cheeks, while Caleb made frightful grimaces to conceal his emotion.

"Mrs. Mildmay knows my history, and the consideration which she has benevolently shown me has also been most basely misrepresented. It seems hard that having offended no one intentionally, I should have been made the object of a most unfounded calumny. I have seen better days, and moved in good society. The late Captain Mildmay knew me then. You will, I am sure, feel the same commiseration for me which you would have liked others to feel had a son or a nephew of your own been placed in my unhappy position."

That clear voice was now almost choked with emotion. Oh, if she could only have seen him! But in her blindness was his safety.

"Say no more, say no more, I beg. You may rest assured that I never listen to the gossiping twaddle of a little country village. Only I must depend on your honour not to allow Mrs. Mild-

may's name to be compromised in any way. She is a most excellent, benevolent creature, and the interest she has felt and shown for you has provoked vulgar and impertinent misconstruction. I must depend on you to remove and avoid all future causes of observation, especially during my absence."

"You shall be obeyed to the utmost of my power, although, I assure you, Mrs. Mildmay is the only living creature who knows me as I am. Even my own mother has passed me by, and not recognized her son, so changed am I; yet I am neither convict nor culprit of any description!"

"Your own mother not recognize her son! Two of mine have gone before me, but if either were to return, and I could see, I should know them again, never mind how changed. You copied a portrait of my best beloved son, one taken from me, I suppose, because I sinned in loving him too well. The broad Atlantic covers all that remains of him. All I have left of him is my Ethel. I pity your mother, if you dare not renew your intercourse with her. Why not try?"

"It is too long a story, and no fault of either hers or mine; but I must beg you to forgive this

intrusion of my own affairs upon you. Allow me to express my sincere thanks for the past, and hopes that your ladyship may benefit by your visit to town."

She held out her hand to him for the first time, except when thanking him for Ethel's life; perhaps it was to show her confidence in his integrity.

With two trembling hands he accepted her taper fingers.

"May God watch over and keep you." His head was bowed over her hand, and a tear fell on her white cuff. Then he reverently released it, and he was gone.

"What a strange, wild, earnest character that man has! Ethel, love, are you there? Have you been there all this time?"

"Yes, Grannie."

"Was he crying? His voice was so agitated and broken! Ethel, I wish I could *see* that man! Come here and tell me carefully what he is like."

Ethel came over from the window, and sat on a low seat by her grandmother, and took the still trembling hand in hers.

"He has jet black hair, rather grizzled; long black beard; a very dark swarthy complexion,

almost Italian-looking ; one cheek has a frightful seam on it, from his lower eyelid to his jawbone ; and the eye on the other side of his face is always covered by a shade ; he is tall and lame, sometimes more so than at others, from rheumatism caught in Australia, he says."

"Ah ! It answers no description I can call to mind. I wish Nellie could tell us who he is. I am strangely drawn towards that man, strangely interested in him. Did she ever give you an idea, Ethel, who he might be,—I mean by any faint allusion ?"

"I never asked her, dearest. She has only told me what she told you, and what he confirms now. We must respect his feelings, and not pry into what he does not seem to wish us to know. I am sure Nellie would never keep anything from you which she could help."

An hour after this visit Ethel was wending her way to the Cottage, trying to fasten the broken links of her chain to make them fit, and to deduce some result from them, but in vain.

"Why did he not tell Grannie at once that he knew my father ? And why did he go on in that wild way, and not tell her what he told me ? And here am I, bound down by promises on every

side, made the repository of everybody's secrets, which are not my business in any way, and which yet encircle me on every side. Oh ! I do so wish I could find out all, and be done with these mysteries. But nothing shall tempt me to ask a single question ; I am determined on that."

So deep was her reverie that she had turned an angle of the river, and had come suddenly upon a garden-seat occupied by Caleb Williams before she was conscious of the fact. He was gathered up with his face in his hands, and all in a heap, as if in some deep study, or severe pain. The sound of her step startled him, and his start made her aware of his presence.

"Ethel, come here and sit down. I have something to say to you alone, and we may not meet again for some time."

Ethel had all her grandmother's stateliness inherent in her, ready when circumstances called it forth ; she coloured, and drew herself up to her full height. She was grateful to him, she liked him, and she sympathized with him, but she did not choose to be called "Ethel" by him, nor did she choose him to tell her to "sit down," so she said coldly, "I am going to Mrs. Mildmay's now,



perhaps you will come there with me?" He looked at her earnestly for a few moments.

"So I offended you, my child! And no wonder. I don't blame you for resenting my manner; but I have been strangely agitated, and have lost all self-control. Will Miss Chetwynd do her father's oldest friend the favour of sitting down, and hearing what he has to say, and, for the time, let him call her Ethel?"

She smiled faintly, and yielded,—sitting, however, at the other end of the bench, and turning a grave, inquiring countenance towards him.

"Ethel, do not imagine that I blame you for your reserve; it is what you ought to show, even to me, in general; but our positions with regard to each other are peculiar. It is necessary for me to support the character which I have assumed,—in fact, which belongs to the position I fill; and I should be sorry if you forgot yours, or called down on yourself observations by treating me otherwise than as an artist favoured by Lady Agnes Chetwynd's patronage. But there is, as I have told you before, a link between us not the less strong because I am obliged to conceal it. You promised me, if you wanted a father's care, that in my humble way I should fill his place.

Do you still feel disposed to entrust me with your confidence? Will you still call upon me in the hour of need?"

Ethel looked at the earnest, passionate face beside her, from which every feeling except the one of which he was speaking seemed banished. She saw that his whole soul was bent upon securing her trust in him.

"I will; but your strange manner frightens me. What do you apprehend? What danger to me or to any of us?"

"Not personal danger; but you are entering on a period of life fraught with peril to most girls, and peculiarly so to you. You have no parents, and your one protectress is blind and aged. You are a reputed heiress; you will require judgment and good sense in no common degree to guide you; and there are contingencies in which *no one can* help you but *me*. Remember this for your own sake. I have a power over your future no one knows but myself; a right to use that power no one dare dispute, though no one knows the nature of it but myself. All you have in the world may depend on my evidence, in a certain contingency,—one which *may* never happen, but which probably will occur. Re-

member, whenever your interests are at stake, I can and will help you. I will watch you wherever you are. I shall be in London when you are there; I shall watch you going to Court; I shall watch for you when you are going out, to see how you look in full dress. I shall always, as I have done for years, make you the chief interest of my life. If anything serious happens to you, I shall not be long in coming to the rescue. I live but to serve you,—to see you well married and protected, and then to *die*.”

He spoke in the low, subdued tone of one who felt deeply, but who subdued those feelings, or rather concentrated their full force on each word, for each came out as if by itself, clear and distinct, as if it was his aim to engrave each separately and indelibly on her memory.

She sat quite still, with bated breath, taking in what he uttered, and trying to comprehend its full import. At length she said—

“I thank you. I feel you must have some very strong motive for what you say, although I cannot understand you; but I have promised, and I will keep my word. Whenever I do want a friend, I shall send for you. But why not say this to Lady Agnes?”

"I would not for worlds disturb her tranquillity. While she lives you are safe from the danger I fear for you. I think I may be sure of that; and would you like, knowing her love for your father's memory, to tell her what might excite her even to the shortening of her days? and which, I tell you frankly, would be an irretrievable injury to a large family, some of whom never heard of me,—and all, remember, for a remote contingency."

"No, not for any interest of mine shall she be disturbed; but, oh! don't you think she is likely to live a good long time still? She is wonderfully healthy, you know."

"Long may she live! is my most fervent prayer; and therefore I so far test your fidelity. Remember, what I say has nothing to do with our relative positions in life. In your most important, as your most trivial concerns, command me."

"I will."

"And now I suppose you will think me a very strange old fellow indeed,—one with a 'shingle short,' a 'bee in his bonnet,' or a 'screw loose' somewhere? You may rely upon it, if I have ever shown want of judgment before (and if I

had been wise in my youth I would not have been what I am now), I never was more sane than I am this day, although I have seemed, and indeed been, so excited, and my whole nature stirred up to its inmost core."

There was a blending now of something less serious in his manner; he smiled, and held out his hand.

"It is not conventional, I know, but quite safe. Shake hands with Charlie Chetwynd's representative."

Ethel put her hand frankly in his. "If I don't seem as grateful as I ought,—if I don't show you, what I never forget, all I owe you,—it is because all seems so strange, and I must act like—*other people, you know.*"

## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE DRAWING-ROOM.

A FEW weeks more, and they were all settled in town for the season. Robert had no wish, however, that the operation on his mother's eyes should interfere with the gaieties into which both he and Marion intended to plunge, so it was deferred till late in the spring.

There was now a nice point for the ladies to discuss, and, if the truth is to be told, wrangle over. Marion, although she had never before been presented herself, claimed the right of presenting Ethel. The girl was living under her roof; she was the wife of Ethel's uncle, the head of the whole family. It would be a public slight upon her if Blanche were allowed to usurp her

place. She did not pretend to like Ethel; she considered the fuss made over her quite disgusting. She would have much preferred it if the girl had remained at home altogether; but, if she must go out at all, Marion stood up for her rights as *chaperone*. Upon the other hand, Blanche was Mrs. Commissioner or Lieutenant-Governor of no end of provinces, east, west, and north. She was a person of more individual importance, *she* thought; she was Ethel's *own* aunt, and above all, she had been promised *first*, and Ethel she knew preferred her; so there was a pretty little question between them, and at once the keen zest of Ethel's pleasure was blunted.

Blanche undertook to order Ethel's dresses, and Marion declared she knew nothing about it. What could Blanche know of taste or style? living all her life among barbarians who were content to make walking bales of muslin of themselves, and cover their bodies with jewels, and call that dressing! Dressing was a science acquired only by years of experience, and who had had better opportunities of acquiring that science than herself? She, who had been living in the gayest capitals and baths of Europe, and

meeting daily the best society in the very best and most *recherché* toilettes? It was absurd! Each said she was content that the other should "make a guy of herself" if she liked it; but inch by inch they contested the point about Ethel's dresses, until the girl, wearied out, often selected for herself something quite different to anything either would have chosen, to show her impartiality. Marion, however, would sneer at Blanche's oriental barbarisms, and Blanche was still fighting for supremacy.

When Lady Agnes heard even the guarded discussions in which alone they ventured in her presence, she began to think that there might be some truth in Marion's views, and her darling should not be sacrificed between them; so when she got Ethel alone, she remarked—

"Ethel, it appears to me if I don't take care, those aunts of yours will make a show of you between them. Blanche would dress you like a Sultana or a Begum, and Marion like one of the meek misses who are taken out to market in Paris by their mammas, arrayed in simple apparel. I want you to write to Madame Le Brun; she used to make for me, and she or her representatives stand high. She is really a French



woman, not an English woman Frenchified by a *Madame* before her name. Tell her that the Lady Agnes Chetwynd wishes her to call on her for orders. I flatter myself I can, with the help of her modern taste and fashion, order you a costume at once elegant, simple, and *distingué*, although I *am* blind, my child; and for the sake of my own old prestige, I should like my representative to keep up the credit of the family fame, though it was as a 'Wilbraham' that I shone as a court beauty! Say nothing about it to your aunts, but don't let them select your court-dress yet; put them off until I see about it. All this wrangling unhinges me."

So Madame Le Brun came in a very natty little brougham, and had an interview with her old customer. She was a veteran in her line, and only vouchsafed her experience to "distinguished customers." She had an experienced young lady with her, and between them they examined Ethel critically; discussed her "style," "colour," "tone" "air," learnedly, and as if she were an inanimate work of art. Finally, they decided that white must predominate in her dress.

Clouds of tulle, relieved only by fern leaves, delicate feathery ferns and wood anemones, and

in her hair wood anemones and ferns, and a white silk train trimmed *en suite*.

"Mademoiselle provides in her own person sufficient positive colour, dark hair, reds, purples. Pardon, Mademoiselle, I speak as an artiste; I have study de science of colour. It is the white flowers in your hair, and the green in your robe which will bring you out."

"Look, Mademoiselle Céleste!" and she threw a spray of flowers over Ethel's head; "you will look clear, brilliant; you comprehend, Miladi?"

"Roses for her! Forget-me-nots! Lilac! faugh! She would kill them, or they her." And first one, and then another of the denounced colours were thrown over her, as if she were a lay figure, while Ethel stood in the middle of the room, half amused, and very patient.

Lady Agnes had perfect confidence in Le Brun. She said—

"Do your best to make her look every inch what she is, high-born, and high-bred; keep your vulgar finery for others, Le Brun, who can better appreciate it."

"Quite so, Miladi. The taste of some of the ladies now is terrible! and dey is so obstinate! So much de better for dem who have de true taste, I say: Mamselle will be unique."

So the Gordian knot was thus cut, and the rival aunts told that the court-dress was decided upon for Ethel, and their services dispensed with. Then each consoled herself with the disappointment of the other : Lady Agnes's fiat was not to be questioned.

But a fresh chagrin awaited them.

Among the first to call on their venerable relative, although they had not seen her for some years, were Lord and Lady Avon, the heads of the Wilbraham sept.

The Countess was a member of the household, and he had been poor Charlie's friend, as we may remember ; the one under whose auspices (however innocently) the poor lad had come to grief. In days gone by, Lady Avon had kept clear of that unhappy household ; but now the old story was ignored, they were charmed with Ethel, and said so, very frankly, before her, speaking of her as of some prize pet of the lower orders of creation, intended for an agricultural show.

" You intend to have her presented, of course. Can I be of any use ? " Her ladyship's practised eye saw at once "*success* " registered for the young *débutante*, and, like all worldly people she delighted in assisting *the successful*.

Lady Agnes had no sort of scruple about contradicting either of her daughters; Lady Avon was decidedly the best *chaperone* for Ethel, and that was quite enough for her; so this disputed point, too, was settled in a manner by no means satisfactory to either. Each considered herself slighted and aggrieved, and both nourished spiteful thoughts towards Ethel (neither daring to feel angry with their mother); Ethel, who had been as passive in the matter as a lamb! Even Robert, who was in the habit of sneering at their "straw-splitting," comforted himself and them.

"Let her enjoy her reign; it will be a brief one, or I am mistaken."

Then both his wife and sister wished to know what he meant; but, like the oracles of old, he would say no more. However, Marion had recourse to her notes, the old almost forgotten affair of the picture and Robert's openly expressed opinions then, and the scramble for precedence with Dora. "Illegitimate! Her reign, then, will be short, if Robert can make it so." *And she was comforted.*

Since their arrival in town, Gilbert had been in and out of both houses, but, except on one or two brief occasions, the special intimacy with

Ethel was not at first ostensibly renewed, as he told her then, because it was impossible *yet*. His Aunt Pelham found him a most useful and attentive nephew, catering for her enjoyment in every way ; and Robert and Marion were equally delighted with his consideration for them, so that he still contrived to be much with Ethel in the natural course of events. He expressed his unqualified approval of Lady Agnes's "generalship" to her ; no arrangement could have been more satisfactory *to him*, he said. In fact, he was so pleased with everything, that he had almost made up his mind to "be rash," and go in for winning by proposing for her hand at once to Lady Agnes. But, no ! he was too wise for that ; he must see first how she "took." There would be more *éclat* in seeming to win her from all admirers when she was in the zenith of that success which he felt secure for her. It would be very effective to have the engagement announced at that time, whereas it would be dreadfully slow for her to be presented as a *fiancée*. Besides, it would give him time to hear through others about the *dot*, concerning which he had heard such contradictory reports. Under Lady Avon's countenance, it seemed impossible that

the idea of her questionable birth, suggested by Robert, could be true ; even if it were so, and there was not much money, were Ethel to become a star, it might not be *infra dig.* for a man of his position to marry her, if the misfortune was *carefully concealed* ; but, after all, it came to this—he was very wide awake, and he would see his way clear first, only he wished he could help feeling so “ deuced spoony ! ”

The Dacres, too, were in town. Miss Dacre, somewhat *passé*, was getting rather loud, fast, and horsy, after the manner then coming into fashion. Guy, too, was with them ; and in virtue of being county neighbours, the two families found excuses for constantly meeting.

Gentle in manners, and refined in mind, with all the elements of a good fellow about him, the admiration which Guy felt for Ethel had become akin to a sort of worship. Had she been poor, he was the very fellow to have drawn her out, and to have danced with her, and provided partners for her ; but Guy shrank from the word “ heiress ” almost as much as he recoiled from those who too palpably recognized his own eligibility as an heir. Free from all conceit and affectation, he had too much observation not to see that it was his goodly

heritage, and not himself, which made him an object of such solicitude to *chaperones*, and what he so much detested in others he could not endure that Ethel should suspect in himself.

Lady Dacre's maternal wisdom had long ago foreseen the possibility and advantage of so eligible a match for her son as Ethel was believed to be. She had fêted the Priory guests with that object in view ; but she had also understood her son's character so little as to avow her object, and to suggest the propriety of his going in for the prize. The result was a coldness and constraint of manner towards Ethel now, which somewhat piqued her, indifferent as she had been to his first spontaneous admiration.

She liked him, and, in her frank girlish way, would have been easy and unconstrained in his society, if he had permitted her ; but although he hung about her a little, and danced with her sometimes, his manner was a puzzle to her, and but for her all-absorbing love for Gilbert, she might have tried to find out "the reason why" of this little enigma too. She saw by Gilbert's air that he was not cordial to him, but she really had not time to think out these important questions as she used to do in the country.

The drawing-room decided upon for Ethel's *début* was to be held late in February. It happened to be one of the last (though no one guessed it then) at which our gracious Queen was seen by the side of her beloved husband, consequently one of the last at which she received the homage of her subjects in person for years.

There had been great consultations about the oculist, and Dr. Simons had examined Lady Agnes's eyes, and had given a favourable opinion as to the results to be hoped for from the attempt, but he said she must be prepared for it, and her diet changed; why, no one could say. She complied with every direction very patiently, but the altered regimen did not agree with her, she lost strength and tone under the new system, which was a serious loss to one of her age, and then, although she drove in the Park regularly, the air was not the air of Woodlandshire; she did not feel strong or elastic, as she used to do. Robert had decided, and induced her to assent to the arrangement of postponing the operation until the beginning of Lent, which was late that year. He said that he knew she would be flurried and excited about Ethel's presentation, and the balls which were to succeed it, and that by his



plan they should be very quiet at the critical time, and that before the after season commenced, he trusted she would be down among them with restored sight.

So this was the programme to which all parties consented, and in the meantime the momentous day arrived upon which the *chefs-d'œuvre* of the court-milliners were to be displayed. First to be crushed into the tiny carriages, then becoming fashionable, as if in opposition to the enormous crinolines which attained at that time their greatest circumference; then to be displayed for a few hours to the amusement and gratification of the admiring million along the footways of Piccadilly, St. James's Street, and other favourite thoroughfares, who had thus an opportunity afforded of criticising at their leisure an amount of aristocratic beauty, dress, and jewels, never seen except by the most favoured mortals on any other occasions; on their alighting to be again squeezed, and crushed, and torn, and crumpled, in a struggling crowd, until they were carried in a mutilated mass into the Royal presence. Here, after being displayed for a few seconds, and having offered their homage, they were to sail away like graceful but somewhat

dismantled craft after a storm ; and then, after undergoing a similar squeezing and crushing, to be again packed into little broughams and landaus, and whisked home as soon as the experience and dexterity of the coachmen could extricate them from the crowd. This Gilbert told Ethel was what was called "a Drawing Room." "Great humbug, you know, but it is a thing to be done, and the sooner it is over the better."

Marion and Blanche were to go together, for Blanche, to her great humiliation, found that she had to be presented herself by the wife of the head of the Indian Establishment of the day, and this lady had kindly included Marion, as a married lady who gave no trouble, for Lady Avon having secured her *débutante*, made no further offers to any one.

Ethel was dressed early, and even Marion admitted that she looked well. Tall, slight, and majestic, her head rested well on her shoulders ; and the quantities of her luxuriant dark hair would have made her a magnificent coiffure, even without the fern leaves and anemones which seemed to fasten in the light feathers which drooped behind. This hair was brushed off her broad intelligent brow, and left the clear outline

of her face unbroken. Her throat was clasped by a collar of magnificent pearls, worn on a similar occasion by the Lady Agnes Wilbraham on her presentation more than forty-five years before, a treasured relic, which, with some ceremony, had been brought forth for this auspicious day.

Ethel's sharp elbows had ceased to trouble her, and she had learned the legitimate use of those feet and legs now, which in days of yore used to inconvenience her so sadly. She had taken daily dancing lessons, and with her ready ear for music, had soon become skilful and graceful in her ball-room evolutions, so that there was no *gaucherie* to be detected in her movements when she swam about the drawing-rooms waiting for her *chaperone* and trying to get accustomed to her dress. She was, in fact, a queenly-looking creature, her maid thought, and she "knew what was what," she said.

Excitement gave brilliancy to her complexion, and brightness to her eyes—eyes of the deepest violet grey, which, under their magnificent but delicately-cut brows, looked almost black, shaded as they were by deep black fringes, and the tints on the lids, nature's gift in her case, were such

as ambitious Orientals produce by artificial means. She had not been long ready, when Gilbert dashed up in a hansom, armed with two magnificent bouquets. He said he had heard Mrs. Chetwynd express some doubt about her flowers, so he had driven to Chiswick to secure them; but Ethel knew that this was only an excuse to see her dressed; and when Marion drove off, and left them, even in the presence of her grandmother, she could not reject a silent kiss on her forehead, and the words "my own," whispered in her ear at the same time, enhanced her beauty by the sweet consciousness of being beloved by him. Her own costly bouquet was left to be rescued by her maid, and placed in water, while his gift was treasured, and raised to her lips as he placed her in the carriage beside Lady Avon.

The veteran *chaperone* not only looked, but expressed her admiration most warmly.

"You will do, dear! What a pity we shall have to sit here for hours and droop like faded flowers before we can enter the presence."

They crept slowly along. At one time they were by the edge of the Green Park, unable to move for nearly a quarter of an hour.

"I suppose you are too excited to read, my

dear! I have the 'Cornhill' here, I always bring something, this waiting is so tiresome."

But to Ethel, all before her was too new for that; she sat with her back to the horses, and consequently fully exposed to public admiration, for she was too shy to ask to pull down the blinds, and besides, she rather enjoyed seeing what was going on, and as Lady Avon had no objection to having her charge admired she kept them all up.

"My eye! ain't she a stunner!" exclaimed one youth, coolly looking in at the window, and appealing to a companion as apparently incapable of appreciating beauty as himself.

"Yes, r-a-a-ther! Well enough! I seen lots o' these here drawring-rooms all along the streets; she 's a good enough looking gurl, I dessay, but my young woman is hawful jealous, so don't say I said so."

Ethel almost laughed outright at this. Then came two youths of a rather higher grade, judging by their apparel.

"Look, James! isn't *she* lovely?"

"Which? The old dame, or the young one? The old one is a trump I can see, and the gurl is weally not a bad specimen; but I have seen so

many of these affairs that I seldom stop to look. You country fellows go into a state of excitement about everything; try, my good fellow, and look as if you were used to it all,—that is *tong*.”

Ethel began to feel uncomfortable as well as amused, and Lady Avon saw it.

“It’s quite usual, dear, and no one minds it. It is better to be complimented as you are than to have one’s enamel and pearl-powder coolly pointed out by practised eyes, as I have heard it done,—not to myself, however. This is one of our institutions, and part of the necessary routine for a lady of fashion to undergo.”

As she looked out again, fresh faces met her view, and a murmur of admiring observations caught her ear from time to time. Behind the moving crowd, with his back to the Park railings, stood a man whose swarthy visage and black beard at once attracted her attention. He was well dressed in the ordinary costume of a gentleman, and in a good black hat; it was Caleb Williams. In an instant their eyes met, and she knew him. She smiled a blushing recognition, and he looked his gratification; but a warning finger was raised; she was not to know him. His eye was still shaded, but with a much smaller

patch ; he had evidently taken up his stand there to see her, though he looked about from carriage to carriage, as if only amused by the crowd. Again she felt the yearning of her whole nature to know "the reason why." Who was he, and what had this man to do with her ?

Then Gilbert sauntered up, and told a fib,—said he was looking for the Pelhams' carriage, and had somehow missed it. He had seen them once, he said, that morning. "My worthy aunt looks as if she had fallen from the heavens : she is all blue and diamonds, sky-and-stars." Then he condescended to approve of Marion's toilette, which was of deep rose colour,—said it suited her dark complexion, which was not quite as fresh as it might have been once. Then he leant on the carriage-door, and talked club-gossip to the Countess, while he feasted his eyes on Ethel's beauty, and made time seem to fly while she listened, until there was a move onwards a-head, and the carriage crawled on a few steps further towards its destination.

Then Gilbert left, and, as he raised his hat, and they exchanged one of those eloquent looks lovers know so well, she felt that Caleb saw them, and the bright colour rose to her temples.

“He will know that one of his hopes for me is likely to be realized, and even he cannot object to Gilbert.” So, with these reflections to sustain her, there was little wonder that she looked as bright and fresh when she entered the Palace as she did a few hours before, when she stepped into the carriage at her own door.

She was a success! All the world said so. All the dowagers gave her second place, after their own particular pet, who, of course, had the first in each different family circle. And Lord Avon, who met them at the Palace-gates, and escorted them in, and who fought for a passage for them so skilfully that Ethel only lost a small quantity of tulle and one bouquet of anemones from her train, and his wife a few inches of priceless lace from hers,—even Lord Avon declared he was proud of his young cousin.

“Your poor father, my dear, was a great favourite of mine, poor fellow! A great pity he did not confide in me; I should have pulled him through. And your poor mother, too!—such a lovely girl! But you are not much like her. If your poor father had come to me in his trouble, he might have had you on his arm to-day. Poor fellow! You are quite a Wilbraham.” Which



communication, being quite unintelligible to Ethel, though intensely interesting, gave additional lustre to her eyes, and enhanced her beauty.

Even while bending to her Sovereign, the first question on her mind was, "Oh, what is this mystery about my father?"

Lord Avon had produced this effect quite innocently. He was only beguiling the time while they were waiting, and half thinking aloud; for he fancied she knew all about it.

And Caleb?

Upon that memorable day he saw more than one familiar face, dear to him in his youth, but between whom and himself death had, as it was believed, placed an eternal barrier.

There was a brother, with the lines of sin as well as of time on his face, enjoying his patrimony and casting it to the winds, who passed him by, and never condescended to look at him, or any person of his apparent class. There sat a sister, leaning back languidly in her carriage, heedless that the brother who used to carry her on his shoulders, and pet and fondle her, was now wistfully gazing at her not very far off, and tracing the work of time on her faded features.

There were the companions of his boyhood—portly men now, with the honours and cares of life upon them, and he without a spot upon which to lay his head and call it *home*! And yet, why not? Why should he not claim his own heritage? And then he thought of the consequences; and Caleb took up his cross again, to bear it meekly, as he determined, to the end. “Only one faithful friend, and upon her I have brought slander and reproach!” He saw them all pass by, these friends and relatives of the past, and then he turned into the Park, and there, on a bench near the fountain, and sheltered in a measure from observation, Caleb sat and wept.

“How long, O Lord! how long? How long am I to endure this all, and live?” And then again he thought of *her* for whom he was making this sacrifice, and was strengthened. Then he rose up, returned to his lonely lodgings, and sat down to write a long letter to Nellie, pouring out his woes and an account of Ethel’s loveliness on the same sheet.

“I think she likes me, Nellie, as much as she ought to like any one in my position. Much as my heart yearns to her, it would wound

me for her sake to have her accord me that familiarity which in itself would be the crowning joy of my life if I could claim it in the right way."

The next day Ethel wrote two long letters by her grandmother's side; the first to Nellie, telling her all about the drawing-room, and the second to Mrs. Pryor. This lady had written to ask her to do this, so partly in her own words, and partly from her grandmother's dictation, she wrote a rather graphic description of the scene, enlarged on his lordship's interest in her father, and the compliments he paid her mother, and his kind expressions about both her parents. She had sat at her grandmother's knee the night before, and told her the whole conversation with Lord Avon from beginning to ending, with the hope that the old lady would say something—something to enlighten her about the past, but nothing came but the observation—

"My love, you must write to-morrow to Mrs. Pryor."

"Yes, dearest."

"Be sure you tell her all about your presentation, for I think she has a great interest in you."

So after the letter was written, and read aloud, Ethel said, "Anything more, dearest?"

"No! But now I think of it, you may add as a postscript that I find the country far preferable to the town; and tell her if she takes my advice she will not venture into the whirl and noise of the season. She is not strong, poor thing, and I am sure it would be very imprudent in her state. Now send it off by the first post."

Later in the day, Ethel, still sitting at her grandmother's feet, said,

"Grannie, I want you to tell me more about my dear father and mother. There always seems a mystery, and I felt so queer when Lord Avon spoke of them. What did he do? I am old enough now to know. I should be better prepared when people make allusions,—Uncle Robert, for instance."

"My child, your poor father married foolishly, and secretly. His father was stern, and so was hers, and they were both very young and giddy. Poor Charlie was an accidental witness of a murder that was committed, by whom, no one knows to this day, but rather than give evidence against any one, he went away, and for a time incurred suspicion himself. He wrote to tell me of this,

and to assure me of his innocence, but, at the same time, his determination to go out of reach of every one who might force him to give his testimony. He then told me for the first time of his marriage, and confided his young wife to my care.

"He sailed in a large ship, the destruction of which by fire has become a matter of history. All perished on board of her but twenty souls, and he was not among the twenty."

Tears choked her utterance.

"I went to meet your poor mother in Normandy, and in the little village of St. Marie you were born, and lost your mother at the same time. I brought you home, and you have been more than a daughter to me ever since."

And the aged hand stroked Ethel's head caressingly.

Ethel's tears flowed fast and freely.

"That must have been what Lord Avon meant when he said he 'would have pulled him through.'"

"Yes. I must tell you that your grandfather showed your father's last letter to me to Robert. We were all sitting together at the time when your uncle, with that abominable propensity he

has for burning everything, threw the precious document in the fire.

"I have never forgiven him for it. I never have him near me without thinking of that dreadful day. But, my child, I went up at once to my room, and wrote down the contents of that letter, word for word, as I remembered it, and the circumstances under which the original was lost, and I put it with the copies of your father's certificate of marriage, and other papers in the second drawer on the left hand side of my escritoire, which is the one in my own room at home. These papers are in a sealed packet. All I have in the world will be yours, darling; but that packet may be of use in proving your birth. Your certificates of baptism are there also; you were christened at Blackgang, in the Isle of Wight."

"Thank you, dearest, I can understand much now which was not clear to me before."

But in truth the clearness was only a feeble glimmer of light on a very dark subject. Who was Mrs. Pryor, and who was Caleb Williams? What did they know, and how could they have anything to do with her history? Surely everything would be "clearer" without them, unless

they could tell something about that murder? Then her uncle! She felt an instinctive certainty that he had always hated her, and now it turned out that he had destroyed what was so precious as a family document, that even his own mother had never forgiven him.

There was a mocking deference in his manner to her now more intolerably offensive than his former rudeness. She saw that he was making use of her to obtain invitations for himself and Marion. She knew Marion did not like her, but yet Marion manœuvred to keep her apart from the Pelhams when she could. Ethel had an analytical mind, and she was never satisfied with the surface of things; but she was far less satisfied with what she suspected that surface covered.

## CHAPTER XV.

## BOHEMIAN SPECTATORS.

WHILE the intended visitors to Her Majesty's Drawing-room were awaiting their turn in the slowly-moving procession, they were exposed to the scrutiny of other classes of observers besides admiring friends of their own, and the youths who expressed their opinions with the frankness and candour recorded in a previous chapter. Men and women of every grade passed to and fro; some on their way to business, giving only a casual glance at the brilliantly-dressed occupants of the carriages, as they pushed on with a fixed intent and earnest preoccupied air—the marked characteristic of the Londoner, accustomed to such spectacles; others who



turned out for the express purpose of parading slowly along that side of the streets close to which the police obliged the line to proceed. Strangers from the country found this a rare opportunity for observing the beauty and fashion of England in its gayest plumage,—ladies of a grade below the rank of the upper ten thousand, or whose ambition did not aspire so high, or whose purses were too slender, or who were, from various causes, precluded from taking part in the pageant, here found a kind of solace in examining by daylight, and “quite close, I assure you,” the far-famed jewels of this countess, the peerless charms of that duchess, or the paste, pearl-powder, and enamel by which certain people, of whom they knew *something*, contrived to make a show almost as imposing as the genuine articles it was their aim to simulate. These ladies, escorted by a longsuffering father or some extra-goodnatured brother, feasted their eyes, or, on the contrary, indulged in sarcasms to their hearts' content, according to the feelings inspired by the various objects of their secret envy or admiration. From Pimlico and Brompton, even from regions about St. John's Wood, came others who dispensed with the escort and protection of

parents and brothers as a rule, and, alone or in pairs, looked at the scene before them and took notes of the dresses, etc. etc., seldom within reach of their class.

Among the strong-minded promenaders in this promiscuous crowd were two handsomely-dressed women, who took two or three leisurely turns from the end of St. James's Street to Hyde Park Corner. They had no escort, being "able to take care of themselves," as one laughingly observed to the other, who did not vouchsafe either assent or contradiction to this assertion.

This rather taciturn member of the sex was a short, rather stout woman, approaching middle age, perhaps already arrived at that undesirable bourne. She was dressed in a rich black moire-antique robe, a black velvet cloak, and a spring bonnet of the same dark hue, relieved only by a bunch of scarlet anemones in front. She was closely veiled, but not enough so to conceal a pair of bold light blue eyes, *retroussés* features of an insolent, wilful, defiant expression, and a complexion of several questionable reds, which the decided colour of the flowers only made appear a few shades muddier; her forehead was all but covered by a quantity of befrizzed and frowsy-looking yellow

hair, which floated under the curtain of her bonnet in a befrizzled and untidy mass behind. This queer *chevelure* was the distinctive feature of Jane Ash; and as it frisked from side to side across her fat dumpy shoulders as she moved, there was as much of character and individuality in the expression of her *tournure* as could possibly be detected in her face.

Her companion was a tall, over-dressed young woman, towards whom she appeared in the character of *chaperone*. This young woman was Hannah Martindale. She was tall, full, and remarkable in her appearance, not only by reason of her elaborate costume, but from the showy style of her physique. She had an immense quantity of jet black hair, jet black eyebrows, which had evidently undergone some cultivation since her rude country days, a pair of black eyes flashed under these brows, and a pair of cheeks, rosy enough in themselves, had their colour now heightened, to satisfy the perverted taste of the wilful Hannah, by the addition of rouge. A coarse, somewhat *retroussé* nose and lips, of suspiciously carmine hue, completed a countenance at once attractive and repulsive, piquant and forbidding, irregular, harsh, and yet, with a certain

amount of buxom handsomeness—the result as much of her get up as of her natural appearance—which made men, and women too, look at her and admit that she was “a fine woman.” Her black hair was combed back from a low, narrow forehead over a high cushion, à *l'impératrice*, and, after the fashion of that day, was dressed low on her neck. A maroon-coloured velvet bonnet, under which flourished a garland of variegated flowers, surmounted her already high *coiffure*, over which *coiffure* fuchsias dangled from the wreath above, a little white blonde, and a few gilt ornaments added to the confusion of colour, and helped to make the head more showy and remarkable. A dark blue silk dress, with embossed flowers, was extended over an extravagantly wide crinoline, and a handsome shawl, which cost a fabulous sum, draped the ample figure of the redoubtable Hannah. She swam along in all her bravery, stared boldly at the envied and hated occupants of the carriages, and came to the conclusion that she was as good as any one of them, any day, with all their “stuck-upness and conceit of themselves.”

“Well! They call themselves beauties! I declare I have not seen a decently good-looking

girl! A few little dolls! little pink and white misses in white tulle! but all the young girls are awful shabbily dressed,—not a decent silk among them, or any diamonds to speak of,—only on the old dowagers. I say, Jane, there he is! Look, look, there he is, leaning on that carriage-door! And I declare, if he isn't talking to rather a good-looking girl.—I say, *Jane*—*Do* speak, can't you? Look at the liveries. Who are they?"

"Don't speak so loud, he will hear you!"

"What if he does? I don't suppose he means to deny my acquaintance, although he is among grandees. I am not ashamed of myself, I can tell you; I've as good a fortune, I'll be bound to say, as that fine lady who is sitting there so demure. I say, Jane, whose crest is it? You're a dab at them things?"

"It is Lady Avon's carriage, but she has no daughter, and that is certainly a beautiful girl with her, whoever she is,"—and Jane thought of a time when—well, before that solemn erasure of a name took place, which was never now mentioned in polite society. And Jane's reminiscences were very bitter indeed.

"I know I've seen that face before. Who is she? I've seen her somewhere. Do just turn

back a bit and pass slowly. If I get another look, I'll soon tell you who she is !”

“ What does it signify ”

“ A good deal to me, I can tell you. Didn't you see how sweet Pelham was upon her ? Can't he cut it fine just ?”

“ Hannah, I do wish you would not be so coarse and vulgar in your language ! I have done all I can to teach you ; you know how to speak properly when you like, and if you are bent upon marrying a gentleman, you should try to speak like a lady.”

“ Such bosh ! As if they don't like me better than those milk-and-water misses who can't say bo to a goose ! Why, Pelham told me himself it was quite the go for fine ladies to talk slang worse than mine, to please the men. No, Jane, I ain't going to take on any of their fine lady airs ; them as wants Hannah must take Hannah as she is. Why, I could twist Pelham round my little finger if I had a mind to ; and once let me say I'll have him, and I bag him in six months. What odds will you take ?”

“ I would rather not take any. You are too rash ; you might succeed, but not as you play your cards.”

"Bosh! here we are again, and he's hooked it, though I don't think he saw us. Here they come slowly on. Take a look now. By Jove! It's her! Jane, I say, don't you remember her now? I'd swear to her among a thousand."

"No, I can't say I do recognize her!"

"Why, she's the girl as got the brush at Finchington! Don't you remember the girl on the chestnut? With the fat old coachman on the old carriage horse, puffing after her? Don't you remember her proud, 'aughty airs when she sent back the brush? And don't you remember how I chucked it over the hedge to spite Pelham? He wouldn't tell me her name, so I just found it out. She is a Miss Chetwynd, of the Priory at Woolerton, one of your young ladies who are kept in glass-cases. No end of a swell in her own opinion. If she thinks she'll catch him, she is in the wrong box, I tell you."

"I think they are in some way connected. Didn't he say so?"

"I don't mind if he did; but here he comes." And Hannah bridled and minced a little, unconsciously, in spite of her boasted indifference. But Gilbert's sight was bad, he screwed a glass into one eye, and pertinaciously stared at a car-

riage which was approaching, raised his hat, and then, turning his back on the pedestrians, commenced a conversation with another carriageful of ladies, who were thankful for the interruption which beguiled the tedium of their progress.

"Do you believe he didn't see us?"

"I could not say."

"I wish I knew! Wouldn't he catch it!" And so these dames passed on towards their home. Mrs. Ash had a well-appointed little establishment in Brompton, and after some hesitation she had consented to receive her friend Hannah Martindale, and go out with her during the season for a *consideration* so handsome that, although the arrangement interfered with the progress of a romance which was announced for May, the authoress could not resist the pecuniary temptation, as well as that which accompanied it, in the shape of a new character to study. She had done Hannah before, but in a light sketchy fashion—so light, that she was sure that by changing the drapery and colouring a little, she would never be recognized as the old model.

There were some sterling traits in Hannah she thought, which, touched up, would come out



effectively under her skilful pen ; besides this, it was something to this proud, fallen woman to be held in such high estimation by one of her own sex, one free from stain as yet, and not likely to fall. Gilbert Pelham was another "study" for this strange woman. She had long ago taken a pretty accurate estimate of his character ; his cold, calculating, conceited nature was quite transparent to Jane. She held him in great contempt, but for that very reason, she revelled in the notion of one day marrying him to Hannah, bearing him off in triumph from all the old dowagers who were scrambling for him, and who had one day thrown a stone at her, enjoying their discomfiture first, and then seeing him writhe in the toils as Hannah Martindale's husband and slave.

Mrs. Ash wrote at night, and on no occasion did she ever leave her room until luncheon time. This was a stipulation made with Hannah from the beginning, and as that damsel had quite enough to think of and to do in her own schemes, it never occurred to her to inquire into the occupations of her friend during the early hours of the day. She little guessed how she was being "done" by that friend ; how imagination had anticipated

facts, and what vicissitudes she had encountered, and what scenes she had enacted in those pages which day by day increased, and would now soon be consigned to the publisher's hands, in exchange for a cheque of several hundred pounds!

Poor unsophisticated Hannah in her wildest ambition never dreamed of figuring as a "heroine" and a "darling,"—an object of admiration, and of imitation among those "proud, 'aughty, stuck-up she-swells," as she called them, whose doors were sealed to her. She never dreamed of what was soon to occur—that her slang and her bye-words and her racy-horsiness were destined soon to be imitated by lively young ladies of the fast order, who, tickled by "Zenobia's masterly and original development of (her) character," were to take her as a model of *piquante* raciness and *aplomb*. Jane Ash knew it though, and, in her silent reticence, enjoyed an amount of secret gratification unknown to her for many years; it was a compensation to her for much.

I must apologize to my readers for venturing to stray into a groove which I would fain avoid, but our paths in this world are not always

straight and smooth, nor are our companions always of our own selection. When a free lance of the calibre of our friend Hannah makes a raid on those preserves which are deemed sacred to the prowess of more illustrious dames, we are compelled to hear of it,—compelled to know that a son, a brother, a nephew, lucky if not a husband, has been irrevocably lost to us—a victim, a prey, a prize, at any rate, a triumph to her prowess. We see glimpses of them on the surface of society; we gather up our skirts and pass the other side of the way. We really know nothing of their every-day life, and yet, in a coarser way, this woman at all events was only aiming for herself at exactly the same end her more polished sisters had in view—"an establishment," "a settlement" as the wife of a rich man. Hannah was hedged in by her pride and ambition; she was too rich and too cold to be "foolish," and her biting comments on the weakness of her aristocratic enemies, were thorns and nettles in the heart of her *chaperone*. Hannah was not bad hearted; had she guessed at Jane's antecedents, she would have been merciful.

In blessed ignorance of her history, Hannah felt no scruples, and little mercy, when dilating

upon the morals of May Fair and Belgravia, and in commenting upon the scandals which the press occasionally brought to light. She read trials with avidity, and favoured her friend with racy comments thereon, nor was she at all shy in discussing with the gentlemen of her acquaintance the escapades of their set thus revealed to vulgar notice :—we may rest assured, therefore, that when Gilbert dropped in to a late supper that evening, that Hannah did not spare those upon whom he had bestowed his attentions. She did not tell him that she had noticed him at all on the scene, nor did he think it necessary to admit his own feelings of trepidation and dismay when that India shawl and those voluminous blue flounces hove in sight. She was good fun, he said, in the house, and safe from the observations of ladies. He had made up his mind—almost—to marry Ethel, and in that case he must drop that circle, for a time at least; but until all was arranged, it was like putting on a loose shooting-coat and slippers, and being at ease, to drop in and smoke a weed with Hannah after doing proper with the ladies of the upper sphere. After all, there was no harm in it, even if Lady Agnes knew of this low acquaintance.

Hannah was safer company for a man of his class than most women, whom it was not etiquette for his female friends to know. Her aim was matrimony, and he would introduce fellows to her who might do worse than take Hannah and her money; but although he enjoyed the idea of her ridiculous *penchant* for himself, the idea of a man of his clear judgment and perfect taste falling a victim to such a woman was out of the question. Some fellow who was hard up and horsy would be Hannah's fate.

Jane Ash saw the situation, but she calculated on chances; she knew something of the Wilbrahams once, and Gilbert's reticence, when chaffed about the girl on the chestnut, before and since, had spoken volumes to Jane. It was a little plot she should like to see worked out, and perhaps "do" herself again. The race between the high-bred, refined, young patrician, and the coarsely beautiful, free and easy, but wealthy plebeian. She knew that Hannah's best chance lay in that girl's refusal of Gilbert.

"If he can get her, he will take her; but only let her slight him, and she is worth a coronet,—then he will drop into Hannah's net;—only she is such a wrong-headed fool in playing her cards!"

So, at Jane's solicitation, Gilbert often "dropped in with a fellow or too" after the Opera, and talked stage-talk with actors, actresses, and fast men and women, was patronizing and familiar with Hannah, and in all cases acted the *rôle*, so dear to some men, of being king of his company, and able to say and do much he would scarcely have dreamed of in his aunt's house, or any home over which an English matron presided. And this state of things continued for some weeks, indeed for the greater part of the early spring.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## GILBERT TAKES A PLUNGE.

For six weeks Ethel was in a whirl of dissipation. Balls, operas, concerts, *matinées*, succeeded each other so quickly, and there was such an eager contest to secure her presence at every house to which she was invited, that a stronger head than Ethel's might have become giddy without the safeguard she possessed in having her affections concentrated on one object.

Sometimes, at especial places, she was chaperoned by Lady Avon, but on ordinary occasions by one or other of her aunts; she was as much a bone of contention at home as of solicitude abroad, and this did much to cast a damp over her enjoyment. The bickerings and sneerings were incessant in her home; and as she rather,

indeed, decidedly preferred her Aunt Pelham, she would not hear her abused in her absence,—this provoked Marion's ill-temper, and her uncle's mock deference.

"It is well to be a beauty, and a reputed heiress!—to have matrons squabbling over the privilege of acting as *bear leader* to you! Your head will be turned, Ethel; and remember, the greater the elevation, the more stunning the fall when you *do* take a false step."

To her uncle's sarcasms Ethel never deigned a reply.

Then Blanche would come in and say, "it was all too bad!" She declared, "Marion has no more idea of being a *chaperone* than my youngest baby! All she cares for is filling her own tablets. If it were in her power to win away a partner from you, Ethel, she is quite capable of doing it. I do hate to see married women of a certain age trying to play the part of a girl! Look at her face! you can see at a glance that she is quite *passée*, although dark-haired women wear better than *blondes*" (and she thought of her own washed-out and withered person, that was India).

"I don't mind being seen with my blooming



young niece by my side. I can look after her interests far more efficiently than that Frenchified little doll of a thing who is never off the floor when she can get a partner. I don't make such a fool of myself as to dance."

Ethel was dreadfully weary of all this! Her only refuge was by her grandmother's chair, as they never ventured on a dispute in her presence. It mattered little to her with whom she went out, she was sure to meet Gilbert and dance with him, and oftener than at first, for Ethel was now established as a reigning *belle*—a "success," and, according to Gilbert's policy, it was quite "safe," even for the reputation of such a very cautious man as he was proud to be considered, to have his name coupled with hers,—to feel certain that men as cautious, as wealthy, and often more highborn than himself, were seeking for what he secretly claimed as his own.

There was no fascination which a man of the world could throw into his manner in his intercourse with the woman he had determined to win, which Gilbert Pelham omitted with Ethel. He knew exactly the kind of homage most likely to tell with her; she was delicate, sensitive, modest, with all her triumphs; and it was the silent,

secret, unobtrusive sort of devotion which he paid. He dwelt much on the romance of their growing up to love each other from their cradles (which was a mere *façon de parler*), and of their deep enduring passion ; “ not a mere ephemeral fancy of the moment.”

“ You were my deliberate choice before I knew you were so handsome, for it is only by comparison that beauty can be tested, after all.”—  
“ Now, dearest, I shall bear you off, as the winner of the Derby or the St. Leger bears his cup, from many illustrious rivals. If we could only dispense with that frightful time of probation and trial, when we must stand before the world as *fiancés*!—the cynosures of all our admiring relatives. Darling, let us postpone it a little longer, and shorten it as much as possible when it becomes inevitable. Our uncles and our aunts, with all their eyes upon us! Oh, the idea! I am sure it deters many a modest youth from matrimony! You are above the triumph of leading about your captive in silken chains, and displaying him to envying multitudes.”—  
“ Eh, dearest?”

Ethel shrank from such an ordeal as much as he did.

“ No, dearest, tell my darling Gran whenever

you please, but don't make people stare at us, it would mar all my pleasure."

Both aunts, however, began to speculate,—to see or suspect "something," and to ask pointed questions; and to these questions Ethel's blushes gave far more significant answers than her guarded words conveyed.

Robert had looked upon Gilbert as a very useful stop-gap in keeping off other and more earnest candidates,—Guy Dacre especially.

There was no accounting for tastes, and if the girl would blindly prefer Gilbert, who would never marry her without the Priory, to men such as Guy and others, who cared only for her beauty and *ton*, it was the safest arrangement for him, and no fault of his. Robert trusted to his knowledge of the young man's character for the assurance that he would not commit himself unless he "saw his way clear." It is astonishing how satisfactory it is, even to the most unscrupulous, when their victims unconsciously assist at their own sacrifice! If Ethel would be such an infatuated fool as to waste her affections on a keen-witted, cold-blooded schemer, her dear uncle could not help it! Why did she not encourage the heir of Dacrelands and its ancient baronetcy? It was not his fault!

The only real danger lay in Gilbert's going to Lady Agnes and getting an explanation from her. Chance might give him an opportunity, and Marion was therefore left on guard, without being initiated in the why, while Robert rather fastened on the young man, and, as he fondly, though vainly hoped, worked himself into his confidence.

Thus, while smoking in Gilbert's chambers, somehow the matter came on the *tapis*, *à propos* of something in which Ethel was incidentally concerned and her name mentioned. Robert only looked at Gilbert, a sly, knowing, confidential look which meant anything, or everything, or nothing, and Gilbert answered that look in words,—he wanted to draw out Robert.

"I own the soft impeachment, I am not invulnerable to woman's charms or woman's blandishments, nor do I pretend to shut my eyes to the happiness within my reach. I think I may be so presumptuous as to say that should I eventually decide on the step, I need not fear a repulse," and Gilbert caressed his tawny beard as if it had done him some good service in the matter. Robert smoked on.

"There is only one point, and upon that I

admit I have some lingering scruples," and Gilbert held up one arm obliquely, as a heraldic sign significant of his meaning. He "put a very fine point indeed on the matter," he would not even utter the word his gesture indicated.

"Yes, poor thing," said Robert, suspending his puffs, "it is a sad pity, and no fault of her own. Young men will be young men, and my poor brother was no exception to the rule. Had he lived to finish sowing his wild oats, he might have been an ornament to society, and I at this moment better employed than in supporting the burdens of an over-encumbered estate as the senior representative of a venerable house. I felt once that I had capabilities for something better, but it was my Kismet to be Chetwynd of Chetwynd Park,—the last of his name, unless whoever marries my girl takes that name! He must do it.

"You know, my good fellow, I warned you from the first of that little blemish,"—and Robert imitated Gilbert's gesture. "It is a family secret which it is my duty, nay, my interest, to conceal; although it must come out some day, from my poor mother's obstinacy in making her wishes take the place of facts."

"I think it could be managed, though," sug-

gested Gilbert, thoughtfully. "I am a great favourite, I think, with Lady Agnes. I must come and have a quiet *tête-à-tête* with her some day, and see what can be done. I don't see why the world should be enlightened now, after the matter has slept so many years."

Robert invoked all the fiends to his assistance in preventing the accomplishment of this dangerous proceeding ; he only said, however :

"A very good plan ; but, my dear fellow, I have one great favour to ask of you. Postpone this step until after my mother has undergone the operation, which is to be performed next week. It is imperative that her mind should be kept perfectly tranquil, and free from all anxiety and excitement ; and her whole heart is so fixed on that dear girl and her affairs, that should so painful a subject be raised, just at this critical moment, it might endanger all. Ethel has refused every engagement for the next three weeks, and is to devote herself entirely to her grandmother, so that I must positively interdict any allusion whatever to such an interesting subject until her recovery. Then you may rely upon my good offices ; for I need not tell you that I should consider my niece, under these circumstances, very

lucky in securing such a match. You do her too much honour, in fact, with all her beauty—in her position.’”

But Gilbert did *not* “rely” upon anything of the kind. He smiled a placid smile, and stroked his beard caressingly, as he apostrophized his departing friend, as soon as the door was closed on him :

“Very good, my dear fellow, but I am not asleep. You are an admirable son, no doubt; but I don’t quite appreciate all your devotion to your aged parent. I shall make a point of seeing my dear old friend alone, to-morrow, if possible, and have it all out of her, or with her, as the case may be.”

That night Gilbert devoted himself to Marion, and in the course of two or three waltzes managed to acquaint himself with her engagements for the day following; and when he knew that both Ethel and her aunt were safely occupied at a morning concert, he presented himself in Curzon Street, and asked to see Lady Agnes.

“Robert has forbidden me the house after next week, so I have come to have a cosy chat, like old times, once more; and then when we next meet, I hope you will *see* me.”

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“Robert makes too much fuss ; he would make me quite nervous, were that possible. I have such a longing to look on my darling before I die, that I begin to think that I have consented to take a foolish step, perhaps a presumptuous one. The hand of God has been upon me for years—a chastening, perhaps, I am to bear to my grave ; but I have many motives for wishing to see again.”

Gilbert sat fidgeting with his hat, even looked into it, as if for inspiration, for he was in a state of mind rare for him ; he did not know what to say, or how to open his subject ; how to mystify his own aims, and elicit her opinions. He plunged, therefore, at once, into the long years they had lived in such close intimacy, and the kindness she had shown him always ; she had been a second mother to him ; he wished he were bound to her by a closer tie, something which would entitle him to a claim on her, a right to be more peculiarly her *son*.

The old lady smiled approvingly, but said nothing to help him on.

“I am thinking that when you are well, and able to look at me, you may be better able to judge whether I am worthy of being accepted in that light,—in short, of being entrusted with



your *greatest* treasure. I have many rivals, and it may be presumptuous to be too sanguine, but I think I stand as good a chance as any of them." Then, having taken the plunge in earnest, he waxed warmer. "It has been the dream of my boyhood, the aim of my maturer years; purifying my life, and filling me with the desire of being worthy of *her*."

"I, too, have had my dream, my castle in the air, as I thought it might only prove. You are both my children, and if she consents I would sooner entrust her to you, who must love her for herself alone, than to a stranger who may be merely attracted by the *éclat* of her beauty, and the reputation of her expectations; a stranger would be a severe trial to me, Gilbert, while you will seem only in your own place at the Priory. You are too wealthy to be tempted to look forward to an old woman's death for your wife's dower! The Priory will be your home as much as if I had gone to my last resting-place, whenever you are disposed to make it so, and yet give me the comfort of my darling's society. It will be hard to part with her to any one, but less so to you. I am almost certain my poor Robert will never be able to pay off the heavy mortgage

on the property, which I hold, and which will be a portion of Ethel's dower at my death; in that case the place will be hers, instead of the money. I have left her all I possess in the world if she survives me, except some trifling legacies; I arranged all this years ago, but now, if she marries before I go, of course I will have proper settlements drawn up. Don't say a word of all this to any one, except the dear girl herself; I don't want the matter to be discussed in the family until I am up and about again, if God spares me; but you have given me infinite peace of mind, Gilbert. It would have broken my heart had she fallen to the lot of some one who only cared for her fortune. This little talk, my dear Gilbert, will support me through my trial, for I think she likes you as much as she could, that is to say, before knowing your feelings towards her."

A queer smile flitted over Gilbert's features at this.

"I hope you acquit me of all mercenary motives? Fortune has placed me beyond such a temptation as a necessity; I can afford to indulge my affections in the choice of a wife, and I care only for herself, and the gratification it will be to go hand

in hand with her in her devotion to you. There is only one thing I have, I confess, deemed a *sine quâ non* in the choice of a wife—*pure lineage*; and in that too, I believe, should Ethel think favourably of me, I shall be fortunate.”

There was an inflection of voice in this sentence which made it more an interrogative than an assertion, and her quick ear detected it.

“You may rest quite satisfied on that point. It will be proper for you to know every circumstance of my child’s history before you make her your wife; but I have promised to keep quiet now, and I cannot enter into some portions of it without emotion. Her mother was a charming young creature, and one whom I, a *Wilbraham*, would have been proud of as a daughter; let that satisfy you for the present, Gilbert.”

Gilbert was triumphant! He flattered himself he had *sold* his worthy uncle elect, and with a vengeance! Yes; he would get the whole property settled on Ethel at once on their marriage, to come to her after Lady Agnes’s death, then Robert might do his best, or his worst to clear off the mortgage. He saw it all now; the deep plot to hoodwink *him*, Gilbert Pelham!

“That’s your little game, Master Robert, is

it? A heavy mortgage on the Priory, which you cannot touch until you have paid it? I'm not asleep, old fellow, although I shall make you think so." To his old friend he only said, however, "Pray don't think of giving me any explanations; as a Wilbraham and a Chetwynd, all minor names fade out of notice. For my own sake, as well as in accordance with your wishes, I should like this conversation to remain confidential. I was strictly forbidden by your son to mention the subject until after your recovery, but I flatter myself *I* understand you better than he does; I have been more with you of late years, and I know what you like."

"No one *can* enter into Ethel's affairs but myself; I alone am her guardian. Robert has his crotchets, poor fellow, and *don't discuss Ethel's affairs with him*. That mortgage is a tender point. Men will think of their own interests first; but Ethel's father was his elder brother, and had a prior claim, had he survived. Remember this in talking to Robert. Farewell, until we meet again."

Until we meet again! When? Where? Who can answer that question?

## CHAPTER XVII.

## A "SUCCESSFUL" OPERATION.

THE eventful day arrived. *The* doctor, the man of men for eye-cases, an ordinary physician, an assistant, and a nurse, were all assembled. The operation might fail, so they all admitted, but there was not the slightest risk to the health of the patient. If it were a failure, she would only be left in precisely the same state as before, so all the anxiety and solicitude were concentrated on the success or failure of restoring vision. Ethel wished to remain in the room, but this was decidedly refused. Chloroform was to be administered; and as Marion was in a state of hysterical excitement, and Robert unable to manage her, Ethel's most efficient help consisted in de-

coying her aunt to the lowest room in the house, and, for once, telling her a deliberate story. She said that they were not to begin the operation until half-past twelve—twelve being the true hour. Upon this Marion suspended her performances, carefully watching the clock upon the mantelpiece, that she might know when to go off. Not that she was pretending more affection than she really felt for her mother-in-law ; she was weak-minded, and the idea of the critical and nervous operation upset her entirely.

With her eye on the clock, and her hand in Ethel's, Marion sat on a sofa, and expatiated upon her own delicate nervous organization, and how various things affected her ; how she used to be affected when she was a child, and in what particulars Dora took after her. By degrees she turned from the clock to look at Ethel as she enlarged on these interesting topics, when Robert, whose boots had been creaking about the drawing-room overhead unceasingly, suddenly stopped in his walk ; other boots were heard, and doors were opened and shut ; then Marion suddenly ceased in her talk, and looked at the clock again.

“ Oh, I am sure they are going to begin now ! Don't you hear them, Ethel ? ”

"No, I think some one is coming downstairs ; don't you hear ? just wait a moment."

As she spoke, Robert came into the room, and said :—

"It is all over, and, as they hope, successfully accomplished."

Then Marion "went off" in earnest, saying first,

"You have made a fool of me, Ethel, and I will never believe you again !"

Ethel left her then to her husband's care, who might call her maid if he liked,—the Melanie of old, who was growing wiry and withered, after the manner of Frenchwomen, and aged-looking, like her mistress.

Without asking for admission, Ethel soon found her way to her grandmother's side.

"Is that you, my child ? Stay with me, love. Nurse, Miss Chetwynd has always been with me ; I *must* have her about me now ; I shall be terribly put out without her."

"Nurse" flounced a little at this. She had been left in charge of the patient, and she did not choose to have other people meddling in her "cases ;" but she only scowled a little at Ethel, and said :—

"As you please, my lady, if you hold me clear of 'esponsibility. If I get my 'cases' to myself, I am 'esponsible, I always says; but if I ain't left to myself, stands to reason I can't be expected to be 'esponsible."

Mrs. Howell, Lady Agnes's maid, who had dressed Miss Ethel in old times, and who was most faithfully attached to her mistress, was there too, in Nurse's "*way*." There was an anteroom for them both, so Ethel took up her post by her grandmother's side, and seldom left her, except to write letters in the front room, or to partake of her meals. That front room was a sitting-room, so arranged to avoid the staircase as much as possible for the blind old lady.

Two or three days passed thus. The doctors came and went daily, and said "the case" was progressing favourably. Nurse said the same; but still Ethel did not feel satisfied, neither did Mrs. Howell, the maid. There was an inertness and languor which was new to both, though the nurse and doctors said "it was to be expected." Day after day passed, and Ethel still sat in that darkened chamber, trying to cheer her old friend with her lively chatter. Read to her she could not, for want of light, but she could recall every



amusing incident of her late experience in the gay world, could give her fresh young opinions, and get sometimes in return the graver thoughts and experiences of Lady Agnes, anecdotes and reminiscences of her early days, comments on the past as compared with the present—all that could be talked about in the hearing of Nurse, who by degrees became less jealous of Ethel's presence; still, as soon as the conversation ceased, there was a torpor which alarmed Ethel. Marion came at stated times, and escaped as soon as possible. She said she could see no necessity for shutting herself up in a dark room too, and therefore it was rather a relief to be free of Ethel, and able, unnoticed, to run up bills at Marshall and Snelgrove's, Howell and James's, or other such fashionable marts, and to accept all invitations to such mild Lenten festivities as were going on at the time. Robert hovered about his mother, and was as good and attentive as such a man could be with the consciousness of another element warring against those filial feelings, which were trying to assert their supremacy. But Ethel in that room was an irritation to him; he was jealous of her; he wanted to have his mother alone; he wanted to loosen rather

than to rivet the tie which bound them, and which seemed each day to be more firmly united. If he could only sever them by some lucky hit!

"Mother," he said one day, "that girl is looking as pale as death; she should be sent out in the air."

"Indeed, I am not, Uncle Robert! Ask nurse, or any one! I don't want to go out, and I am quite well."

But the hint was enough. Ethel was sent for an airing daily, under the auspices of one or the other of her aunts, generally Blanche, who, to do her justice, gave as much of her time to her mother as she was permitted to offer, for Robert grew imperious even to her,—he did not want her there. Once, even twice, as she either entered the carriage or drove out of the street towards the Park, Ethel saw Caleb Williams. He always happened to be passing, but he never seemed to recognize her, although he knew the arms and liveries too well not to be aware of who owned the equipage.

"He knows it is I," thought Ethel. "I do wish he would come boldly forward and inquire how she is. Why don't he knock boldly, and ask? Why will he be so mysterious?"

These drives did little towards restoring Ethel's tone. The constant dissipation of the few weeks before, while the excitement lasted, did not tell upon her; but when pleasure only gave place to anxiety and that stillness and patient waiting so trying to the young, the girl felt her elasticity leaving her. She was not satisfied about her grandmother. Day by day she became more uneasy. The old lady could not eat; her rest was troubled and broken; and then in the daytime, as soon as conversation ceased, she dropped into a kind of torpor, which could not be called sleep. The doctor said she was "doing well;" the nurse said so too; "what could they expect at her age? all old people dropped to sleep in the daytime." But Ethel knew better, and her opinions were confirmed by the maid, who knew her best.

"My lady is as clear-headed as any woman in her prime, when she is well. Don't tell me 'it is to be expected;' I tell you she ain't as she should be, and I wish I had her own doctor here. It's the shutting up and the smoke and the want of air."

Then, again, Lady Agnes complained of headache, and there was an occasional excitement and irritability, which alternated with her extreme

inertness and lassitude, and which, if "quite natural" in her state, was still very foreign to her nature, usually so placid and enduring.

God sometimes inspires us to acts which at the moment seem even to ourselves the result only of a momentary caprice or whim, but which may influence all our being. Ethel had written her daily letter to Nellie, and sat pondering over the situation—her own utter isolation among her nearest relatives in that house,—her vague fears for her grandmother, which her uncle pooh-poohed on principle. Suddenly she thought of a plan. Her heart had been yearning for Nellie, but no practicable scheme had until that moment suggested itself. She opened the secret drawer of her davenport, and took therefrom a ten-pound note. Then tearing up the second sheet of her already-finished letter, she wrote—

"Grannie gave me the enclosed, to get whatever I particularly wanted, Nellie. I particularly want you now. I feel that I *must* have you, for I am very miserable and anxious. Come to us, dearest Nell, and take lodgings close by us, so as to be quite independent of Uncle Robert. Only for him, I would say, share my room; but I know you would refuse me. Oh, I *do* want

you so very much, Nellie, and I cannot explain why !”

She finished her letter, and sent it off at once. She was still sitting at her writing-table, which occupied one of the windows of the sitting-room, which was over the front drawing-room, the usual stronghold of Marion when she was prepared to “receive.” She tried to get her mind out of the groove of perpetually thinking of her grandmother ; she began to review her past and her present—to speculate on her future. She had not seen Gilbert since the operation, nor had he deemed it expedient to tell her all when he did have the opportunity before it, of the explanation with Lady Agnes ; so she had not that new hope to guide her. He had called at the house, but Marion never deemed it necessary to tell her ; so she did not know it. Her heart yearned for him—for a look, a word ; but she could not seek him.

“ Oh, how I detest these mysteries ! Oh, if I could only get rid of this burden of secrecy, and be like other people !”

Ethel began to feel now that clandestine love was a painful trial, and in a situation, too, where there was no real necessity for it. She felt that

the whole world seemed to her to-day as if viewed through a different medium; she was morbid and unhinged. Turn which way she would, and she was met by a mystery. Gilbert, Caleb, Mrs. Pryor, all seemed to rise before her, and mock her curiosity while they stimulated it. She could not tell how long she had been thus occupied, when she raised her head suddenly, as if determined to shake off these morbid feelings which were haunting her so painfully. She turned towards the window and looked heedlessly into the street, along which carriage after carriage rolled. There, standing before the house, and leaning against the enclosure of Chesterfield House, stood Caleb Williams. He was shabbily dressed, and seemed to be in the act of lighting a cigar, or doing something as an excuse for loitering there. The sight of him seemed to give a different current to her thoughts. She got up from her chair and stood quite close to the glass, so that he could see her very distinctly. She did not do this to attract attention, but to see more plainly what he was about.

Ethel was a country girl, untrained in London customs. As Caleb raised his head and saw her, she bowed without a thought of evil, put her

fingers to her eyes, and then pointed inwards, in token of her hope of restored vision to her grandmother. She quite forgot that from the rooms below her uncle or aunt might notice the man standing opposite, and evidently attracted by some one above. And Caleb, always rash and impulsive, forgot this too for one fatal moment—after all his elaborate precautions to evade notice! So intent was Ethel on this little diversion from her painful reverie, that she never noticed her uncle's stealthy entrance; he was close beside her, and had uttered her name before she was aware of his presence.

"Ethel! that is your game, is it? A very nice young lady indeed! If you were a housemaid, I should discharge you on the spot; as you are only my niece by *courtesy*, I must command you to withdraw from that window, and not bring further disgrace on the house. I should like to know my mother's opinion of such conduct. Who is your friend?"

"You don't know him, and Grannie does. I shall tell her before your face what has passed, if you like; but for mercy's sake be quiet now, and don't disturb her. She was asleep when I left the room; she had been complaining of her head,

and the nurse promised to call me when she awoke. She will hear you if you make that noise, Uncle Robert; and when she is startled, it flurries her."

Ethel spoke in a low whisper.

"That fellow has been loitering about the house this half-hour, and I was watching him behind the curtain. I am a man, but even I would not exhibit myself at a window in London. You see, as soon as the fellow saw my face over your shoulder, he vanished! I admire your choice of intimate friends! Is he your hair-dresser, your dancing-master, or a vendor of Italian plaster-work? He is too shabby for either of the first, I think."

"I shall not condescend to tell you until you learn how to speak to me like a gentleman, and I won't stay in this room to let you scold me and waken her. Grannie knows him, and I shall tell her!"

Passionate tears came to her relief, although she had only spoken in whispers—tears of shame, that in an inadvertent moment she had given her uncle even this hold over her. She felt that this foolish act—no harm in itself, though a breach of conventional rules—would be treasured up against



her.—“Oh, if Nellie were here!” She had left the room as she uttered her last words to her uncle, as much to avoid the noise as to escape him. She locked her door, and threw herself on her bed to weep.

The excitement and seclusion of the last week or two, together with other agitating thoughts at the time, had unnerved her; she felt weak and actually hysterical,—an experience so new to her, that she fancied some terrible illness was about to overtake her. She got up and washed her eyes, and stole quietly to her grandmother's room. She was still asleep, though muttering and starting in that sleep. Nurse and Mrs. Howell were both in the next room, or below.

“Is that you, my Ethel?”

“Yes, dearest; shall I call nurse?”

“No, my love, you can do all I want. I have been dreaming, Ethel, and I am not well. I cannot get strong. I hoped to get out of this room before now. Do you know, dear, I must tell you a secret which I meant to keep until I was better; but perhaps it may give you something pleasant to think of while you are shut up here. I have had a proposal of marriage for you; fancy that, my child! and from whom, do you think?”

"I don't know, dearest; some one you approve of?"

"Yes, some one I approve of very much; some one I should like you to accept, if you have no preference elsewhere; some one you like, too, though I cannot tell how much."

"Tell me who it is, Grannie?"

"You must guess."

"Oh, no, not for worlds! It might be only a wrong guess, and I should look so foolish and vain if I named some one who never gave me a thought,"—and Ethel was trembling from head to foot, and felt a cold shudder creep over her. If it were not him! "Tell me, dearest, and put me out of suspense! I cannot guess!"

"Why, the child is quite excited! I did not think she was so anxious to leave me. Would you be able to marry Gilbert Pelham if I gave my consent and could bring myself to part from you? Don't answer in a hurry; think well. He means to propose to you; he told me so; but don't take him, Ethel, to please me. Be very sure that you love him first."

By this time Ethel was on her knees beside her grandmother, her head buried in her cushions; for the invalid was lying on a large sick-couch opposite the fire.

"My darling, why is this? Do you love him? If so, it should make you very happy; if not, only say 'no,' and I dare say in time he will recover his disappointment."

"Oh, yes! I do, I do! but I don't want to leave you! I will stay with you always! I have been ungrateful and neglectful, and not half as good to you as I ought to be."

For Ethel's conscience was reproving her for having so long concealed her love. She wanted to tell her all now, and relieve her mind; to open her heart to her grandmother,—but she could not betray Gilbert. He had evidently not told of his own sins and duplicity, so she could not.

"When did he speak to you, Grannie?"

"Two days before I was laid up. I charged him not to mention the subject until I was well, and for that reason I never told you. But I fear this is to be a more tedious affair than they said it would be. I may never recover, Ethel, for I feel weak, and my head is so very strange, so wandering at times. I think I am getting into my dotage! So, as I feel clear to-day after my sleep, I have told you now. If I am taken away, I shall go with more comfort, knowing that you

have such a husband secured to you. And you will bear your solitude better now, from having something to think of and look forward to. I have perfect confidence in Gilbert."

Can we blame Ethel for forgetting to tell her grandmother of her scene with her uncle? I think not. Had she even remembered it, I question if she would have intruded the subject on the joy of that moment. She tried to stifle all excitement on her own part, and to avoid it on her grandmother's; but her heart was too full for perfect happiness,—too full for anything more that day. Could she have only foreseen the effect of her omission! That day the hand of God had guided her to write for Nellie: before the day was out, it had pleased Him to permit her to neglect this one precaution, as it seemed, to secure her own exculpation. As it turned out, her grandmother's life hung in the balance, and her neglect to vindicate herself turned the scale! It is thus that, even by the most trivial and apparently accidental circumstances, the most important results are determined.

For the first time she felt her nursing a burden to her; she wanted to cry, and dare not, there. She called nurse for her patient's after-

noon tea, and then, giving her a kiss, she retreated to her room again. She discovered first, however, that her uncle had gone out immediately after their fracas, and, as she learned afterwards, to try and trace poor Caleb, and find him out.

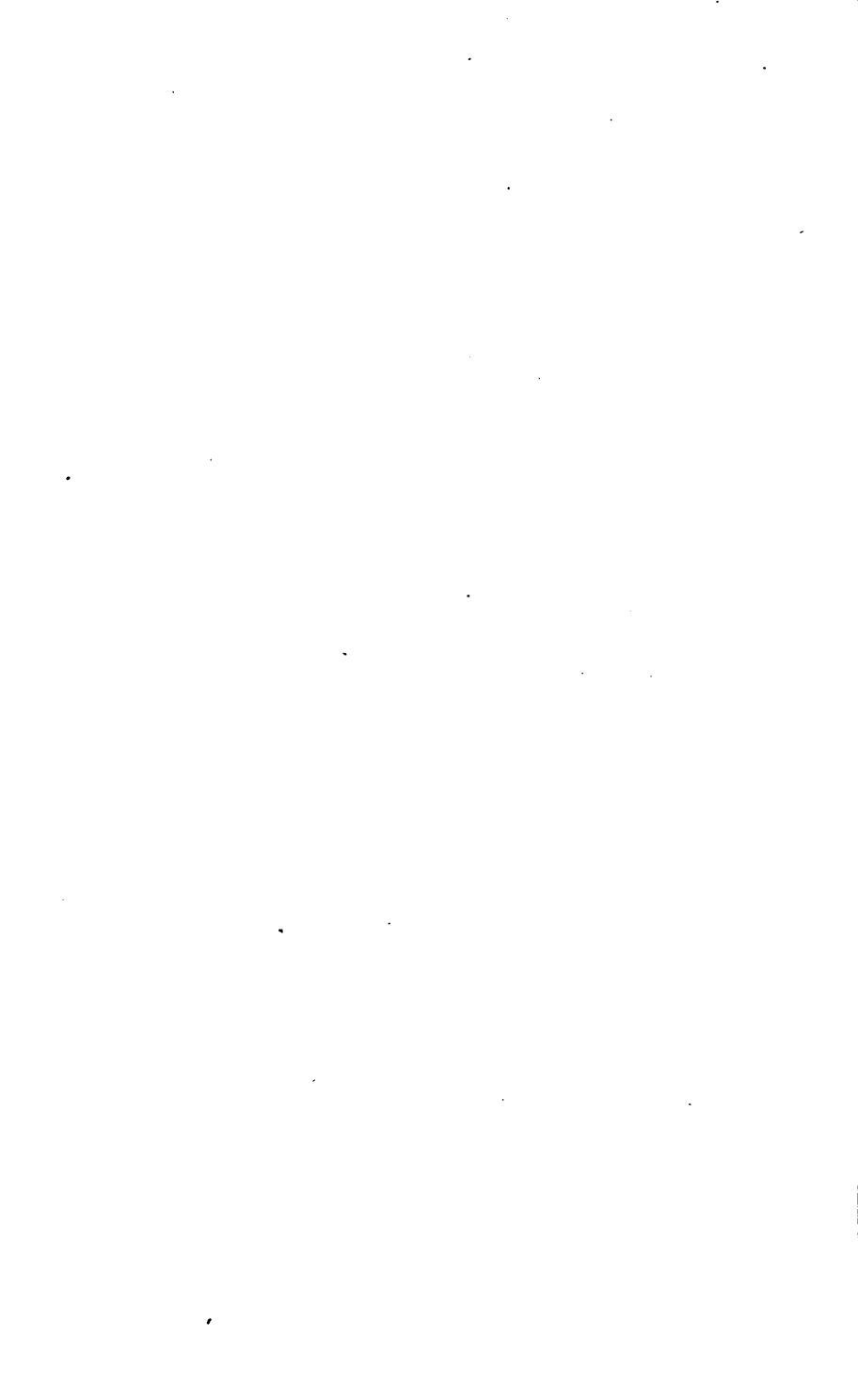
When he had first seen him, Robert had believed the man to be watching for himself:—a constant prey to duns and bailiffs, Robert saw one in every shabby stranger who looked at him. Once relieved on this point, he was determined to use the man and the circumstance to disgrace Ethel. He spoke to a policeman; gave a description of the culprit (fortunately a very vague one); warned all the servants of a suspicious person loitering about for no good; and to each he gave orders that the person in question should be called to account if seen about the house again. This done, he started for the Park, and there lashed himself into a fury during a long and rapid walk. He was a man of this temperament—Robert did not blaze up into sudden passion, and then cool again, as men of more generous natures generally do. Robert's temper was of a yeasty nature; it fermented for hours, and became more and more violent and un-

reasoning; while warmer natures would have stormed out, and have cooled down again. By the time he returned to the house he was ripe for any mad act; and, as it happened, circumstances assisted him with an opportunity. Lady Agnes had taken her tea, and had dismissed the nurse to hers, saying that she would ring if she required anything. Ethel was in her own room, thinking out her future, she said, but in reality in a state of feverish excitement, which incapacitated her for any "thinking" at all. Robert went at once to his mother's room, and found her alone. What he said or did on that miserable occasion was never actually known,—the results were too terrible to admit of much doubt as to its nature, or of much chance of ascertaining the true facts.

END OF VOL. II.

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